Animistic Fictions: German Modernism, Film, and the Animation of Things

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates representations of animated objects in German modernist literature and film between roughly 1900 and 1930. Rainer Maria Rilke's 1902 remark that "all community has withdrawn from things and humans" corresponds to a more general reflection in German literary modernism on a new estrangement and distance between human subjects and the external object-world. Responding to this perceived crisis, modernist texts by Rilke, Franz Kafka, and others present an animated life of things as a highly ambivalent fiction, posing both a distorted and potentially recuperative relationship between humans and things. Alongside textual representations of animated things in Kafka's stories and Rilke's poetry and prose, the new medium of cinema also presented a visual life of things in early stop-motion animation films around 1910 as well as in the experimental films of the 1920s avant-garde. In contrast to nineteenth-century theories on the subjective, psychological origins of animistic experience, literature and film after 1900 approached the animation of things as a matter of external, artificial production. Focusing on the literary works of Rilke and Kafka, and the writings and films of German avant-garde artist Hans Richter, this dissertation argues for an understanding of modernist representations of animated things as "animistic fictions," aimed at producing the effects of animistic experience, while also foregrounding and self-reflecting upon their artificial status.

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Animation of what presents itself, fr[om] the thing on outwards ...

— Charles Olson

INTRODUCTION

A story about German modernism inevitably begins with a crisis. The story told here is no exception and takes as its starting point the well-known ruptures proclaimed by German and Austrian modernist literature around the turn of the century. In numerous texts after 1900, the more familiar crises of language, narration, and visual perception coincide with an even more basic rift in the very relationship between humans and things. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's pivotal 1902 text "Ein Brief," for example, introduces a literary subject, who experiences not only a failure of conceptual language to grasp external realities, but also a related estrangement and fragmentation in his perception of individual things.[1] Around 1900, Robert Musil would begin a journal with the declaration of a frozen "isolation" from his "organic" surroundings; and a similar state of detachment would characterize the protagonist of his 1906 novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, a young military-school student, who perceives external objects as if "through a veil" or as though a "fine net were dancing before his eyes."[2] Perhaps the most emphatic claims that the external world of things had somehow receded from the vicinity of humans can be found in the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke. In a short 1902 piece on

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[1] See Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief," first published in the Berlin daily *Der Tag* (October 18–19, 1902) and collected in Hofmannsthal, *Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden*, vol. 7, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), pp. 461–72, here p. 466: "Mein Geist zwang mich, alle Dinge [...] in einer unheimlichen Nähe zu sehen [...]. Es gelang mir nicht mehr, sie mit dem vereinfachenden Blick der Gewohnheit zu erfassen. Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile, und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff umspannen. Die einzelnen Worte schwammen um mich; sie gerannen zu Augen, die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß."

[2] See Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983), p. 1: "Es ist um mich eine organische Isolation, ich ruhe wie unter einer 100 m tiefen Decke von Eis." Quoted above as well, see Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* [1906] (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1959), pp. 9 and 22, respectively.

landscape painting, to offer just one example, Rilke describes that, in the art and culture of the time, "all community has withdrawn from things and humans."[3]

While many of the central protagonists in the development of German and Austrian modernist literature would articulate a radical rupture in relations between humans and things, the very same authors would also seek to represent a strangely autonomous and animated life of external objects. The crisis of language and visual perception in Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" is expressed in explicit contrast to an alternative mode of experiencing the world, with intimations of an overflowing "life" or silent "language" of things just beyond one's ability to comprehend.[4] In a related manner, Musil's Törleß struggles to account for his sense of the "silent voices" and "questioning eyes" of inanimate objects, and describes, toward the end of the novel, what he terms a "secret, unnoticed life of things" (*geheimes, unbeachtetes Leben der Dinge*).[5] Beyond the mere speculations of literary figures, one finds in the poetry and prose of Rilke as well as the experimental narratives of Franz Kafka even more interesting occurrences, presented directly to the reader, of inanimate objects coming alive with their own autonomous movements and affecting a profound influence over their human counterparts—the reader

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[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Von der Landschaft" [1902], in *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 4: *Schriften*, ed. Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), pp. 208–13, here pp. 212–13: "eine Zukunft [hat] begonnen mitten in unserer Zeit: [...] Daß [der Mensch] unter die Dinge gestellt ist wie ein Ding, unendlich allein und daß alle Gemeinschaft aus Dingen und Menschen sich zurückgezogen hat."

[4] In recounting his near-ecstatic experiences, Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos describes everyday objects as if they were filled with a "flood of higher life" (*Flut höheren Lebens*) or possessed of their own silent language: "eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zu mir sprechen." Quoted here, "Ein Brief," pp. 467 and 472, respectively.

[5] See Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, pp. 126, 129, and 195, respectively.

included. Here, the so-called "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*) in Rilke's two-volume *Neue Gedichte* from 1907/08 and the strange Odradek figure from Kafka's 1919 story, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," are only the most famous examples. In all of these cases, the "life of things" represented in modernist texts bears little resemblance to the marvelous, animated objects of the fairy tale or even the magical artifacts and uncanny automata of Romanticism. To speak of an animation of things in German modernism is to speak of animation with a difference. It is a "life of things" that appears utterly estranged and detached from the desires, control, and signification of humans.[6]

To be sure, this estrangement of relations between humans and the external world of things has long been understood as part of a broad shift in German literary production after 1900, involving the rejection of nineteenth-century realism, a decentering of the bourgeois subject, and a move toward the literary representation of alternative, mental states that would become characteristic of the *Ausdruckskunst* of German expressionism.[7] Beyond reflections internal to the development of modernist literature, this rift between

[6] For a recent sketch of the dynamics of estrangement in German modernist representations of "living things," see Dorothee Kimmich, *Lebendige Dinge in der Moderne* (Konstanz: Konstanz UP, 2011). A similar estrangement of things might be said to exist in Romanticism, as well; although, as recent scholarship has emphasized, the life of things in aesthetic works of the late 18th and early 19th centuries is better situated in relation to cultures of memory and material mementos, as well as the rapid proliferation of exotic objects and manufactured commodities in the crowded domestic interiors of the previous century. Here, it was far more the matter of an excess signification of objects rather than their radical distance from humans. See, for example, the introduction and essays collected in Christiane Holm and Günter Oesterle (eds.), *Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen? Romantische Dingpoetik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011).

[7] For earlier scholarship on the emphatic severing of relations between humans and things in German modernist literature, including discussions of not only authors mentioned above, but also Carl Einstein, Gottfried Benn, Georg Heym, and other expressionists, see Walter Jens, "Der Mensch und die Dinge: Die Revolution der deutschen Prosa" [1957], in *Statt einer Literatur-geschichte*, expanded 7th ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1978), pp. 113–37; and Christoph Eykman, "Das Ich, die Dinge und die Wirklichkeit im deutschen Expressionismus," in *Denk- und Stilformen des Expressionismus* (Munich: Francke, 1974), pp. 108–24.

humans and things can also be understood according to a larger, cultural-historical context with its origins in the middle of the previous century. As various scholars have broadly reconstructed, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a transformation and differentiation in the status and perception of things as a result of modern industrial production and commodification, new scientific knowledge, and the dislocating experiences of the modern city.[8] In modernity, succinctly put, the unique material qualities of things as well as their immediate, personal connections to humans were seen to dissipate into the intangible realms of quantitative abstraction, circulation and exchange, and scientific atomization, whereby things appeared stripped of any concrete, phenomenological existence. In the early decades of the twentieth century, this rupture and bifurcation in the experience of things would become codified, critiqued, and accounted for in various ways in the philosophical writings of Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger, in the sociological work of Georg Simmel, and in the essays of Georg Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, among others.

Whatever the historical, social, or epistemological explanations, a crisis in the status and perception of things was inherent to the self-understanding of German modernist literature after 1900 and played a significant role in its pursuit of new fragmentary forms and an abstraction of representational content. Consider, for example, the experimental prose constructions of Carl Einstein's *Bebuquin* (1907–12) or Gottfried Benn's *Rönne* novellas (1914–16), both of which combine formal fragmentation with

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[8] See, for example, Christoph Asendorf, *Batterien der Lebenskraft: Zur Geschichte der Dinge und ihrer Wahrnehmung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Giessen: Anabas-Verlag, 1984). For a related account of late nineteenth-century American literature and culture, as well as international modernism, see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003).

self-reflections on the unreality and inaccessibility of external objects.[9] Or consider the case of Rilke's 1910 novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in which a traumatizing estrangement and malicious animacy of things contribute to the discontinuous form of the modernist city novel.[10] When, in 1936, Walter Benjamin described the demise of coherent storytelling due to the experiential ruptures of the early twentieth century, his contrast with a past age of artisanal handicraft—in which handmade objects were immersed in the life of their makers and still bore their bodily traces—provided a fitting image for all that had been lost or left behind in the form and content of modernist literature.[11] By the time of Benjamin's analysis, the predominance of fragmentation in literary modernism could be securely linked to a foundational break

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[9] See, for example, Carl Einstein's representation of the creative impotence of his protagonist before external objects in *Bebuquin* [1912] (Berlin-Wilmersdorf: Verlag der Wochenschrift *Die Aktion*, 1917), pp. 24–26; and see Gottfried Benn, "Die Reise" [1915], in *Prosa und Autobiographie in der Fassung der Erstdrucke*, ed. Bruno Hillebrand (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984), pp. 33–40, here, p. 37: "Scheu sah [Rönne] sich um; höhnisch standen Haus und Baum; unterwürfig eilte er vorbei. Haus, sagte er zum nächsten Gebäude [...]; Baum, zu allen Linden seines Wegs. Nur um Vermittlung handele es sich, in Unberührtheit blieben die Einzeldinge."

[10] For a reading that convincingly links the formal fragmentation and problematization of narration in Rilke's novel to Malte's traumatic, urban experiences, see Andreas Huyssen, "Modernist Miniatures: Literary Snapshots of Urban Spaces," *PMLA* 122.1 (Jan. 2007): pp. 27–42, here pp. 27–29. For his more extensive reading of the "dissolution of boundaries [...] between the body and things, the animate and the inanimate" in the novel's interrelated depictions of Malte's childhood traumas and adult, urban experiences, see Huyssen, "Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp.105–26, quoted here, p. 110.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows" [1936], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 438–65, here, p. 447: "Die Erzählung, wie sie im Kreis des Handwerks [...] lange gedeiht, ist selbst eine gleichsam handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung. [...] Sie senkt die Sache in das Leben des Berichtenden ein, um sie wieder aus ihm hervorzuholen. So haftet an der Erzählung die Spur des Erzählenden wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale."

with a past age, which was characterized by a more intimate and close association among humans and things.

And yet the cultural production of the early twentieth century did not only represent and reflect upon an estranged relationship with things. Artists and writers of the time also conceived of a new interdependence and closeness between humans and things as a response and challenge to a supposed disintegration of relations. Taking the elaborate ornamentation of turn-of-the-century *Jugendstil* as his primary aesthetic model, art historian Christoph Asendorf provides numerous examples from the literary and visual arts of the unifying flows of energy and decorative forms that interwove human figures with an animated world of things. Turning to a brief discussion of literary modernism, he identifies a related "animistic" tendency in German modernist poetry and prose after 1900 and cites Rilke in particular as forwarding a literary project aimed at, "die Restitution einer vermeintlich magisch-animistischen Verbundenheit mit den Dingen." In the same section of the book, titled "Lives of Things" (*Leben der Dinge*), Asendorf points to a parallel development in the reception of early silent cinema, providing the following summary: "Die Verlebendigung, das In-Fluß-bringen der starren Dinge, die der Jugendstil mit Hilfe des organischen Ornaments suggerierte, ist [im Film] durch die Abfolge der Bilder zur maschinell bewältigten Selbstverständlichkeit geworden."[12] Drawing a parallel with the symbolic intertwining of humans and things in the ornamental forms of *Jugendstil*, Asendorf thus identifies in the literary and moving-image culture of the early twentieth century the responsive aim of a "restitution" of more

[12] Quoted above, see Asendorf, *Batterien der Lebenskraft*, pp. 136 and 139.

vital relations, analogous to the "animistic" blurring of boundaries between the animate and inanimate, subject and object, mental images and the external world.[13]

In contrast to this account, the present study argues that the "life of things" in German modernism and film cannot be so easily identified with turn-of-the-century vitalism or Western ideas about the supposed "animism" of pre-modern societies. Internalizing a presumed crisis in the fundamental relationship between humans and things, modernist representations after 1900, I argue, pursue the animation of things not as a restitution of some prior, subjective merging with the external world, but rather as a deliberate, artificial procedure. While Asendorf acknowledges the respective "artificiality" and "apparatus-character" of modernist literary and cinematic animations of things, he fails to follow up on this important insight and instead reinforces the vitalistic fantasies of *fin de siècle* culture.[14] Dispensing with the idea of some restored, happy union between humans and things, this dissertation argues that modernist writers like Rilke and Kafka, as well as key figures of 1920s avant-garde cinema like Hans Richter, approach the representation of animated objects as self-consciously constructed fictions, which foreground their artificial status.

While I agree that modernist works can be read in terms of a reaction or response to a perceived crisis in the state and perception of things, this should not be assessed

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[13] Here, see also the sections titled "Animismus," "Lebendiger Gedanke," and "Der Brief des Lord Chandos," in ibid., pp. 137–38, 142–44, and 147–50, respectively.

[14] Asendorf describes Rilke's poetry, for example, as "ein hochartifizieller Versuch einer neuen Verbindung mit den Dingen nach der allgemeinen Alienation." And on cinema, he remarks, "Es ist aber nicht der Apparatcharakter des Lebens der Dinge im Film, sondern, jenseits der Technik, dieses selbst, das die frühen Betrachter interessiert. Die Dämonisierung der Maschinenwelt im mittleren 19. Jahrhundert wiederholt sich angesichts des neuen optischen Mediums in Theorien, die dessen Magie betonen." Quoted here, ibid., pp. 144 and 140, respectively.

merely in terms of representational content or the symbolic meaning of form. Instead of focusing on the supposed *meaning* of animated objects as part of the representational content of the work, this dissertation investigates the intended *effects* of such aesthetic representations in both literature and film. Pursuing a close formal analysis of new, representational strategies and techniques affecting the fictional animation of things, the present study argues that the animated objects of German modernism serve a highly ambivalent function, entailing both a distortion and estranged distance in relation to humans as well as a reconfiguration of animistic experience—from one of internal, subjective animation to a matter of external, artificial production. Representations of animated objects thus function not as emblems of either distortion or recuperation, but rather as complex figures that mediate between effects of estrangement and an open-ended reconfiguration of relations. In analyzing this historical configuration of things, humans, and media in aesthetic representations of the early twentieth century, the following chapters explore a particular constellation of relations that has become a central problematic in recent cultural, media, and social theory.

The two main literary cases to be examined at length in the dissertation are the emphatic representations of things in the poetry, prose, and aesthetic writings of Rainer Maria Rilke as well as the complex roles of animated objects in the stories of Franz Kafka. Rilke's extensive and rightly famous focus on "things" (*Dinge*) throughout his literary career demonstrates, in itself, an important transition that the present study attempts to identify in modernist literary production. Between Rilke's earlier poetry of the *Stunden-Buch* (written 1899–1903, published 1905) and *Buch der Bilder* (1902, expanded edition 1906) and the somewhat later "thing-poems" of the *Neue Gedichte*

(1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908), there appears a crucial shift from turn-of-the-century conceptions of monistic and empathetic mergings between subject and object to a hard modernist conception of things as utterly estranged and foreign to humans. Echoing the dismissive readings of Rilke by Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, Asendorf is certainly justified in identifying the poet's earlier work from around 1900 with a decorative interweaving of humans and things comparable to the ornamentation of *Jugendstil*.[15] With the *Neue Gedichte*, however, Rilke makes a decisive shift from the mere illustration of relations between humans and things to the poetic staging of complex encounters with specific objects, performatively enacting for the reader an estranging and transformative power of things.

Focusing on a number of overlooked poems from the *Neue Gedichte* as well as Rilke's aesthetic writings, letters, and prose before 1910, Chapter 1 of the dissertation identifies this important, modernist transition in the poet's literary representations of things. Rilke's important insight that modernity had somehow introduced a dangerous rupture in the very basic association between humans and things was suggested to him, around 1902, by the joint experiences of the traumatic urban environment of Paris, on the one hand, and the visual art of Auguste Rodin and the Worpswede school of German landscape painting, on the other. In relation to the former, Rilke's Malte would later

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[15] For Asendorf's reading of Rilke's poems, culled almost exclusively from the 1902 edition of *Buch der Bilder*, see ibid., pp. 134–37. For Benjamin's dismissive identification of this earlier poetry with the "emblems of *Jugendstil*", see his unpublished text, "Rainer Maria Rilke und Franz Blei" [1927], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4.1, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 453–54. And for Adorno's better-known dismissal of Rilke's "Dingkult," see his "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" [1957], in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 49–68, here, p. 52.

describe the "corrupted" (*verdorben*) existence of everyday objects, which appear to have taken on their own hostile, animated lives within the tumultuous surroundings of the modern city.[16] In the lives and artistic practices of Rodin and other visual artists, by contrast, Rilke imagined a certain, atavistic connection or mimetic closeness between humans and things, surviving tenuously amidst the ruptures of modernity. As a response, after about 1903, Rilke began pursuing poetry as a means of artificially controlling one's encounter with the world of objects in a manner that attempted to stabilize its more dangerous aspects and to artificially mediate a more positive "kinship" (*Verwandtschaft*) with things, which he found exemplified in the life and work of Rodin.

A similar ambivalence in the status of fictionally animated things can be found in the experimental prose of Franz Kafka. In addition to the famous Odradek figure from "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," stories like "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle" and "Der Kübelreiter" introduce strangely animated things that take on complex narrative functions. In these stories, which will be the focus of Chapter 3, the animation of objects functions not only as a reflection on distorted relations between humans and things, but also as a narrative device for mediating the very same relations. Kafka's animated things function both as living extensions of particular human characters as well as autonomous go-betweens, which draw his isolated protagonists into complex, social negotiations with other human figures in the story. Although, as in Rilke, the estrangement between humans and things is taken as a given, the fictional animation of things plays a complex and open-ended role in the facilitation and reconfiguration of relations among humans and things. And like Rilke's "thing-poems," the animation of things like Odradek is not

[16] See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], in *Werke*, vol. 3: *Prosa und Dramen*, ed. August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), p. 582.

confined to the diegetic space of the text but also suggests itself to the reader as an alternative strategy for experiencing the world of external objects. In both cases, the "life of things" in German modernism exists not as some vitalistic recuperation of relations, but rather as part and parcel of a new fragmentation and estrangement of experience. Despite their autonomous life and power, textual objects like Rilke's "Archaïscher Torso Apollos" and Kafka's Odradek, for example, are inherently fragmentary, on the level of both the work's representational content as well as its indeterminate, formal construction.

Just as important to the present argument are contemporaneous developments in early cinematic production and theory. A focus on the fictional animation of things indeed suggests surprising and largely unexplored, historical interrelations between the different aesthetic media of literature and film. For one, the articulation of a silent "life" or "language" of things in modernist literature after 1900 anticipates the later theoretical fashioning of cinematic structure and effects in 1920s film theory. As Tobias Wilke has recently argued, the "language [of] silent things" postulated in Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" must be distinguished from past conceptions of external objects as legible signs (as in the metaphoric "book of nature") and suggests instead a different kind of immediacy in the experience of things proper to the new age of modern optical technologies. Contemporaneous with the emergence of silent cinema, that is, the experiences of a "life" or "language" of things described in Hofmannsthal's 1902 text can be read, Wilke argues, as predicting the theorized effects of the new medium found in works of interwar film theory such as the important 1924 study *Der sichtbare Mensch* by Béla Balázs.[17] Here,

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[17] See Tobias Wilke, *Medien der Unmittelbarkeit: Dingkonzepte und Wahrnehmungstechniken, 1918–1939* (Munich: Fink, 2010), pp. 27–43. Here, Wilke associates Chandos's description of a

Balázs describes the emphatic transformation of things in silent cinema: "In der gemeinsamen Stummheit werden [die Dinge] mit dem Menschen fast homogen und gewinnen dadurch an Lebendigkeit und Bedeutung. Weil sie nicht weniger sprechen als die Menschen, darum sagen sie gerade so viel."[18] Musil's *Törleß* anticipates the theorization of such cinematic effects in an even more direct manner, making explicit reference to film in order to describe the structure of the protagonist's visual intimations of a "secret, unnoticed life of things."[19] One might even speculate, here, whether Balázs directly borrowed from Musil's 1906 novel when expressing, in nearly identical terms, "the secret—because unnoticed—life of all things," revealed in the cinematic close-up.[20] While the near-visionary experiences of Törleß and Chandos are suspended, so to speak, in the realm of indefinite possibility, theoretical accounts from the 1920s situate cinema

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"Material, das unmittelbarer, flüssiger, glühender ist als Worte" with the new medium of film (pp. 33–34). As Wilke's reading points out, the particular potency of Hofmannsthal's text lies in its superimposition of two distinct, historical transitions in conceptions of a "language of things": the transition to an "immediacy" of things with modern optical media (at the time of the text's publishing) with an older 17th century transition away from understanding things as legible signs (corresponding to the 1603 date of Chandos's fictional letter to Sir Francis Bacon). On the historical transformation from networks of similarity among words and things to a radical separation between the two around 1600, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (*Les Mots et les choses*) [1966] (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 17–45.

[18] Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* [1924] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 31–32.

[19] See Musil, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*, pp. 128–29: "[In Törleß] war beständig eine rastlose Unruhe, wie man sie vor einem Kinematographen empfindet, wenn man neben der Illusion des Ganzen doch eine vage Wahrnehmung nicht loswerden kann, daß hinter dem Bilde, das man empfängt, hunderte von – für sich betrachtet ganz anderen – Bildern vorbeihuschen."

[20] Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 49: "Die Lupe des Kinoapparates wird dir [...] das geheime – weil unbeachtete – Leben aller Dinge [zeigen]." While Musil's 1925 review of *Der sichtbare Mensch*, titled "Ansätze zu neuer Ästhetik," is far better known, Balázs was also closely familiar with Musil's literary writings and even penned a review of the *Törleß* novel in an article published only a year before his first book of film theory. See Balázs, "Grenzen," *Österreichische Rundschau* (April 19, 1923): pp. 344–49.

as an external, visual prosthesis for simulating the kind of "animistic" experiences only imagined in literary modernism.[21]

Less commented on and more central to the present study are not so much the structure and effects of the cinematic medium itself, but rather specific films that make deliberate use of new cinematic techniques to visually animate things. Between 1907 and 1912, there appeared a considerable number of early stop-motion animation films (by an international range of filmmakers including James Stuart Blackton, Segundo de Chomón, Émile Cohl, and Guido Seeber), which succeeded in visually animating photographed objects, making them appear to move about without any human manipulation. As a relatively late and sophisticated example of what Tom Gunning has famously called the "cinema of attractions," stop-motion or object-animation films caught the particular attention of the literary intelligentsia in the early twentieth century and suggested a new realm of aesthetic possibility that was unique to the cinematic medium. Well before the emergence of film and media theory as a proper field of study in the 1920s, various writers of the literary milieu weighed in on the relative merits or, more often, deficiencies of early cinema. Around 1910, in particular, writers like Georg Lukács, Egon Friedell, and Vachel Lindsay singled out the visual animation of objects as a unique, cinematic capability, which distinguished the medium from the literary and theatrical arts. Whereas literature could only linguistically evoke an animation of things (such as found in fairy

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[21] Beyond Balázs, one might also cite discussions of a "life" or "personality" of things by avant-garde filmmakers like Hans Richter and Fernand Léger, or Jean Epstein's direct remarks about an "animistic tendency" (*tendance animiste*) in film. See Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*" [1924], in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, vol. 1: 1907–1929, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), pp. 314–18, here pp. 316. For the French original, see "De quelques conditions de la photogénie," *Cinéa-Ciné-pour-tous* 19 (August 15, 1924): pp. 6–8, here p. 7.

tales and Romanticism), cinema was understood to present a life of things as an "empirical reality" on the cinema screen, allowing things to become animated actors in the cinematic drama.[22] Fueled by the literary imagination of intellectuals and writers around 1910, this emphasis on the aesthetic potentials of an animated life of things in cinema would prove a foundational focus for the more extensive theoretical assessments of film to emerge in the 1920s.

If a literary imagination was involved in shaping an emerging aesthetics of film based on a new "life of things," cinematic animation also played a significant role in influencing modernist, literary representations. After 1910, experimental writers like Kafka, Alfred Döblin, and F.T. Marinetti all drew explicitly on the representations of animated objects in early cinema in their pursuit of new, modernist and avant-garde poetics, which could adequately convey the material presence and force of the modern world of things. Though frequently overlooked, the representation of animated things poses a close and aesthetically productive interrelationship between modernist literature and film in the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 of the dissertations draws together such representations according to common themes of uncanny experience in urban, domestic settings around 1910. Relating literary and cinematic representations of animated things to the new, animistic anxieties and nervousness of the modern city, the chapter provides a cultural and historical framework for understanding this productive exchange between

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[22] See, for example, Georg Lukács, "Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des 'Kino'," *Pester Lloyd* 90 (16 Apr. 1911): pp. 45–46; and the revised version, *Frankfurter Zeitung* (10 Sept. 1913), reprinted in *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1978), pp. 112–18, quoted here, p. 114.

literature and film in the development of modernist conceptions and representations of an uncanny and unsettling "life" of things.

Beginning around 1900, with the emergence of a modernist conception of the thing in the writings of Rilke, the dissertation continues through an investigation of interrelations between early stop-motion animation films and modernist literary representations around 1910, before moving on to a close analysis of the narrative function of animated things in the stories of Kafka before 1920. In the final chapter, the study will turn to a more exclusive study of cinema by looking at the central importance of animated objects in avant-garde films of the 1920s, with a focus on the writings and cinematic works of German avant-garde artist and filmmaker Hans Richter. Understood in a three-fold sense as movement, life, and physiological rhythm (i.e. breath, lat. *anima*), animation emerges as a central category in the cinematic experiments of Richter and the avant-garde, with its own internal frictions that play a crucial role in the self-reflective construction of cinematic effects. While cinema can be understood as a technology inherently based in animation—as in the early English and German descriptions of film as "animated photography" or "living pictures" (*lebende Bilder*)—this is not sufficient to account for the striking emphasis on the animated "life of things" in interwar film theory and avant-garde cinema. Necessary as well was the cultural influence of modernism, which declared a radical rupture in relations between subjects and objects, and imagined instead a new, estranged and autonomous life of things, which could only be facilitated by means of external, artificial production.

In his social, historical, and theoretical account of cinema, *Der Kampf um den Film* (written largely in exile during the 1930s but not published until 1976), Hans

Richter himself suggested as much, linking the "spirit of avant-garde [film]" not only to modernist, abstract painting (as is tirelessly reiterated in secondary scholarship), but also to the "spirit of modern literature." Downplaying the influence of Méliès's early illusionary cinema on the interwar avant-garde, Richter asserts a deliberate mobilization of "cinematographic technology" (*kinematographische Technik*) against the "vulgar, naturalistic theater of the fictional narrative film," as analogous to the formal ruptures of literary modernism in opposition to nineteenth-century realism.[23] Addressing the animation of objects in particular, in his 1928 article, "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," Richter stresses the need to reject "natural movement" in film in favor of the denaturalizing constructions of an "artificial" (*künstlich*) movement of things. Citing the cinematic experiments of Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924) and Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926), Richter affirms the avant-garde's complete liberation of the object from its "rational-naturalistic-symbolic meaning."[24] For Richter, the artificially animated thing was far more valued for its dynamic and expressive effects, which could be precisely controlled and constructed by the filmmaker. As Richter claims in *Kampf um den Film*, the connection between the "spirit of modern literature" and avant-garde films—like those of Léger and Man Ray, as well as his own films like the 1928 *Vormittagsspuk*—was a similar constructive approach to art-making, which considered elements of the

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[23] Hans Richter, *Der Kampf um den Film: Für einen gesellschaftlich verantwortlichen Film* [1939], ed. Jürgen Römhild (Munich: Hanser, 1976), p. 43: "Aber der Geist der Avantgarde war nicht der von Méliès; es war der Geist moderner Malerei und Literatur. Von dorther kommend, versuchten die Avantgardisten, die kinematographische Technik dem vulgären, naturalistischen Theater des Spielfilms entgegenzusetzen."

[24] Quoted above, see Hans Richter, "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung" [1928], reprinted in Jeanpaul Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus* [*Kinemathek* 95] (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 2003), pp. 42–43.

external world merely as "raw material" (*Rohstoff*) to be artificially shaped through the particular means of an aesthetic medium.[25]

To speak of the artificial animation of things in the works of Rilke, Kafka, and Richter as "animistic" requires a brief historical and conceptual clarification. Introduced in the foundational work of nineteenth-century cultural anthropology, *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor, the term "animism" was chosen to designate a "doctrine of souls," which described the supposed belief of "primitive" societies in a nonhuman world populated by animating spirits.[26] Theorized as the "groundwork" stage in the evolutionary development toward modern, religious and scientific views, Tylor's conception of animism was rearticulated, revised, and critiqued in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, playing a central role in the sciences of anthropology and psychology. In its most general sense, the term "animism" in the nineteenth century indicated a basic failure to distinguish between inner and outer, subject and object, mental images and external realities. For Tylor, this was exemplified by the various "primitive" beliefs in immaterial souls or animating spirits that could freely migrate and inhabit both human bodies and nonhuman things. Clearly, my use of the term "animistic" is already one order removed and abstracted from this original, anthropological definition of a "doctrine of souls."

While Tylor's *Primitive Culture* identified the continued existence of animism in contemporaneous, non-Western societies, he would also decry as an inauthentic product

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[25] See Richter, *Der Kampf um den Film*, p. 43–44.

[26] For Edward B. Tylor's definition and detailed ethnographic account of animism, see *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* [1871], vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

of delusion any comparable beliefs and practices among modern Europeans, such as the popular spiritualism and séances of the nineteenth century.[27] When Karl Marx put forward his critique of the commodity form in his 1867 work *Das Kapital*, he would express a similar disdain for modern spiritualism in his infamous comparison between commodities and the dancing or turning tables of the nineteenth-century séance.[28] While Marx borrows the earlier, eighteenth century term "fetishism" to describe the false conception of an autonomous life of commodities, his critique lacks a focus on the base materiality characteristic of the fetish-object and might be more accurately compared with accounts of the life or animation of things in theories of animism that would appear shortly after *Das Kapital*.[29] Whatever the terminology, within the context of the nineteenth-century social and anthropological theory, the notion that things had an autonomous life or animating spirit in modern society was deemed an utter delusion, attributable to either the distortions of modern social conditions, as in Marx, or the inauthentic "survival" of the so-called primitive beliefs described by Tylor.

This reading of the animation and life of things as an inherent falsehood in modernity has played a considerable role in critical interpretations of German modernist representations of things. Giorgio Agamben's 1977 book *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in*

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[27] On Tylor's observations and dismissive assessment of spiritualism and London séances, see Erhard Schüttpelz, "Animism meets Spiritualism: Edward Tylor's 'Spirit Attack,' London 1872," in *Animism*, vol. 1, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 155–69.

[28] See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [1867] (Vienna: Verlag für Literatur und Politik, 1932), p. 76.

[29] See Peter Osborne, *How To Read Marx* (New York and London: Norton, 2005), pp. 9–21, here, p. 19.

Western Culture, to pick one exemplary case, borrows Kafka's animated Odradek figure as an emblem for the distortion of relations between humans and things due to the commodity form. And in his reading of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, Agamben interprets a strangely animate tin object in the latter part of the novel as the result of "bad human conscience with respect to commodified objects."[30] In a similar vein, Adorno understands the emphatic life of things in Rilke's poetry as but a delusional response to the "real power of reification."[31] My own reading of such objects in German modernist literature is situated in explicit contrast to such Marxist-informed interpretations, as well as to the many psychoanalytic interpretations that would view the animation of external objects as a result of psychological mechanisms of projection. Rather than viewing the life of things as a result of some social or mental distortion (whether represented within the text or attributed to author's own conditions), this dissertation argues that the animation of things in German modernism was pursued as a deliberate and self-conscious fiction, which both internalized a sense of crisis in relation to things and, at the same time, sought ways of reconfiguring these relations through the constructive use of aesthetic media.

In this sense, the innovative work of Spyros Papapetros on nineteenth-century animism and animation provides a far more productive and nuanced point of reference and contrast for the present study. In his recent book *On the Animation of the Inorganic*,

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[30] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* [1977], trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 47. This reading of Rilke's *Malte* appears in a larger section of the book titled "In the World of Odradek: The Work of Art Confronted with the Commodity."

[31] See Adorno, "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" [1957], in *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 52.

Papapetros traces the complex interrelationships between anthropological accounts of animism such as Tylor's and notions of animation that emerged in late-nineteenth-century art history and psychological aesthetics.[32] One of the key insights of the study is that theories of aesthetic abstraction and empathy (*Einfühlung*), such as found in the writings of Aby Warburg, Wilhelm Worringer, and Alois Riegl, as well as Robert and Friedrich Theodor Vischer, constitute a Western analogue to accounts of "primitive" animism. Despite attempts to fashion a safe version of animistic and animated experience in modern visual aesthetics, Papapetros argues that such late-nineteenth-century theoretical accounts were more suggestive in evoking the new "hostile external world" of technological artifacts and things in modern society.[33] While Papapetros devotes a chapter to the malicious animistic effects of architectural structures in German expressionist cinema, his predominant focus is on static objects and images, which despite their stillness provoke all kinds of animated responses in the viewer. The emphasis here is less on the external animation of things but rather on the viewer's internal, subjective experiences, which can quickly oscillate between perceptions of a hostile animacy of things and a more positive, "extensional animation," which suggests subtle interconnections between humans and things.[34]

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[32] See Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012).

[33] Ibid., p. ix: "The invention of empathy theory and the revival of anthropomorphism and the physiognomy of objects portray the failed attempt of turn-of-the-century aesthetics to subjectify (and therefore neutralize) the radical power of artifacts in both archaic and modern societies."

[34] See ibid., pp. 20–27.

Building on this insightful work, the present study maintains this basic ambivalence inherent to animation, while also drawing some important historical and aesthetic distinctions not considered in Papapetros's book. For one, while the notion of an empathetic merging of subject and object can be observed to carry on into the early twentieth century—perhaps counter-intuitively—in the realm of aesthetic abstraction, the culture of literary modernism after 1900 also marks a radical severing of relations between human subjects and the world of discrete, material things.[35] Nineteenth-century accounts of an empathetic "Verschmelzung von Subjekt und Objekt" and "der pantheistische Drang zur Vereinigung mit der Welt," such as found in the psychological aesthetics of Robert Vischer, are precisely what is radically problematized and suspended in the modernist literary texts of writers like Hofmannshal, Musil, Rilke, Kafka, and Benn.[36] While modernist writers in Germany and Austria would imagine, in various ways, experiences that, while not belonging to animism proper, could be described as akin, as animist*ic*, this was always with the implicit knowledge that such experiences belonged properly to the past, or to the experiential realms of the child, the primitive, or the psychologically unhinged. Instead, within the culture of modernism, such experiences

[35] The hard distinction between abstraction, on the one hand, and empathy with naturalistic depictions of humans and things, on the other, was codified in the influential 1907 dissertation of Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, 3rd ed. (Munich: R. Piper, 1911). In recent scholarship, Papapetros is hardly alone in emphasizing the empathetic dimensions of modernist abstraction. See, for example, Jutta Müller-Tamm's important study of German expressionism, *Abstraktion als Einfühlung: Zur Denkfigur der Projektion in Psychophysiologie, Kulturtheorie, Ästhetik und Literatur der frühen Moderne* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2005). Asendorf's earlier study, as well, makes related observations on the empathetic qualities of *Jugendstil* ornamentation and the abstract paintings of Kandinsky. For his treatment of Worringer, see *Batterien der Lebenskraft*, pp. 144–46.

[36] Quoted here, cf. Robert Vischer, *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik* (Leipzig: H. Credner, 1873), p. 28.

became a matter of artificial production, either through new strategies and techniques of literary representation or to be found in the new, visual animations of film.[37]

Alongside literary modernism, the birth of the cinematic medium itself around 1900 would also come to challenge and reconfigure the nineteenth-century models of subjective animation. With the "living pictures" of film, animation was no longer considered primarily a matter of subjective, interior experience, but rather a mechanically produced illusion that could be experienced collectively by a rapidly growing number of people. While the foundational myth of cinema was that early audiences, like "primitive" animists, had confused the projected image for reality, the modern viewers were in fact far savvier and were less enthralled by the apparent reality of the moving images than by the animating technology itself.[38] As Hans Richter claims in *Kampf um den Film*, the attraction of early cinema was based in the fact that the movement of humans and things had become externalized, objectified, and estranged for the viewer:

> Zum ersten Mal betrachtete der Mensch sein Abbild in Bewegung, – objektiv, wie etwas Fremdes. Das war das *Ur-Kino!* [...] Es war, als entdecke man erst jetzt die Bewegung der Dinge, – der Umwelt, – die eigene. Das Stück Leinwand am anderen Ende des Saales gab die Ebene ab, auf der man die Dinge, wie von einem anderen Planeten aus betrachten konnte und sich selbst wie ein fremdes Wesen. Dieses Erlebnis hat uns die moderne Technik vermittelt.[39]

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[37] Beyond the focus of the present study, one might also think here of Musil's "other condition" (*der andere Zustand*), theorized in relation to cinema and pursued through complex, literary constructions in his unfinished, experimental novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

[38] See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995), pp. 114–33. On the myth of early cinema's "primitive spectator," see also Assenka Oksiloff, *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 117–34.

[39] Richter, *Kampf um den Film*, p. 27.

With cinema, in other words, the human's subjective experience of the animated world became dislocated and resituated at an estranging distance, in which animation became a matter of external construction rather than lived experience. As Henri Bergson described in 1907, one might look at still images forever and "never see them animated [...]. In order that pictures may be animated, there must be movement somewhere. The movement does indeed exist here [i.e. in film]; it is in the apparatus."[40]

This is not to say that cinematic technologies themselves played an overwhelmingly deterministic role in shaping the artificial construction of animation in literary modernism. Rather, the constructive animation of things in modernist literature and early and avant-garde cinema demonstrates a close, mutual interaction between the two aesthetic media as part of the same culture of modernist production. Writing in 1926, the film critic Rudolf Kurtz attempted to collect and characterize the literary, visual, and cinematic arts of modernism under the broad rubric of expressionist construction:

> Unter einem weiten Gesichtspunkt betrachtet, darf man sagen, daß der Expressionist die psychologische Verbindung von Menschen und Dingen ablehnt. Er ordnet, statt zu erklären. Das Verhalten von „Gegenständen" bestimmt sich durch seine metaphysische Absicht, statt daß er es sich psychologisch klarmacht. Er konstruiert seine Welt, statt sich verstehend in eine vorhandene einzufühlen.[41]

In general agreement with this broad characterization, this study aims to assess the artificial construction and effects of animated things in German modernist literature and film.

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[40] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1907], trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), p. 305.

[41] Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926), p. 22.

The topic of a life or animation of things will likely bring to mind a whole range of recent theoretical work in other disciplines as varied as anthropology, art history, media theory, sociology, and the history of science. Within literary and cultural studies, Bill Brown has been perhaps the most vocal and persistent in pursuing a general theoretical assessment of the life, agency, complex materiality, and interconnectivities of things in the twentieth century and beyond.[42] Extrapolating from the work of Martin Heidegger, Brown has been largely responsible for popularizing a general distinction between "objects" (*Objekte* or *Gegenstände*) and "things" (*Dinge*) in the study of modernist and contemporary, cultural production. As W.J.T. Mitchell summarizes it,

> Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science. Things, on the other hand, are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague. A thing appears as a stand-in when you have forgotten the name of an object. [...] [They] play the role of a raw material, an amorphous, shapeless, brute materiality awaiting organization by a system of objects. Or they figure the excess, the detritus and waste when an object becomes useless, obsolete, extinct, or (conversely) when it takes on the surplus of aesthetic or spiritual value.[43]

Hewing far more closely to Heidegger's original distinction between object and thing, the recent social and anthropological theory of Bruno Latour has sought to loosely combine the philosopher's account of the breakdown and conspicuousness of objects becoming

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[42] See, for example, Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): pp. 1–22. Brown's well-known article has since been collected in an anthology of writings, which provides a helpful overview of current theoretical treatments of objects and things as well as their historical precedents in earlier twentieth-century philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and social theory. See here, *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London and New York: Routledge, 2009). For an extended application of his focus on things in international modernism and American literature in particular, see Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003).

[43] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 156.

things in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) with his later, postwar account of "The Thing" (*Das Ding*) as an emphatic "gathering" (*Versammlung*), through its etymological connection to proto-parliamentary assemblies.[44] Largely downplaying the considerable influence of Heidegger for his work, Latour has presented a far-reaching theory of the active life and agency of things in the networked "collectives" of the contemporary globalized world, revealed most visibly in moments of the material breakdown and failure of functioning networks.

While the recent currency of a distinction between objects and things will be helpful at times in clarifying my readings of German modernist works (Kafka's stories most notably), I would also warn against identifying the literary and cinematic representations of the early twentieth century with current universalizing theories about the life or agency of things. Rilke's emphatic sense of the "thing" (*Ding*), for example, can only be very loosely compared with Heidegger's and it bears even slimmer resemblance to the recent theoretical accounts of Brown, Latour, and others. Where the dissertation speaks most closely to current theory, it is to affirm the basic heuristic value of "animistic fictions" for estranging and reconceptualizing our understandings of the complex roles and status of material things in relation to humans. Here, I am not so much interested in how one might speak of a modern "animism" or "life of things" in any meaningful, realist sense, but rather how recent theorists have taken deliberate recourse to

[44] See, for example, Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to *Ding*politik or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public*, ed. Latour and Michael Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 14–41. For Heidegger's famous account of the breakdown of objects, see *Sein und Zeit* [1927] (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), pp. 90–102; and for his emphatic postwar account of the thing as a gathering, see Heidegger's 1950 lecture, "Das Ding," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), pp. 165–87.

fictional and narrative strategies (even appropriating actual literary representations like Kafka's Odradek) in order to theorize the "lives," "desires," "force," "agency," "speech," and "biographies" of things.[45] If the present dissertation speaks at all to recent theory, it will be to highlight the fictionality underlying much of this work and to problematize current notions of a happy revitalization of relations between humans and things in the animated, technological environments of the contemporary world.

More directly relevant to the current study is the influence that recent theory has had on studies of German literary modernism. Here, the representation of animated objects in modernist texts like those of Kafka have been read in terms of the meta-critique of modernity put forward by Bruno Latour: that is, that the radical separation between subject and object imposed by the "modern constitution" has led only to an unacknowledged proliferation of nonhuman hybrids, which exist at the boundaries of subject and object, nature and culture, and which play their own active role in social networks whether the modern subject admits it or not.[46] Responding to Latour, German literary scholars have read representations of an "Aufstand der Dinge" in modernist

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[45] Political theorist Jane Bennett, for example, draws directly on Kafka's Odradek in theorizing a "nonorganic life" and ecological "force" of things. See her recent book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), here, pp. 6–8. For a range of theoretical scholarship that employs explicitly "animistic" methodologies in the study of aesthetic, scientific, and everyday consumer objects, see, for example, Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*; Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone, 2004). For a recent art exhibit and collection of essays calling for a "reclaiming" of animism in modern art and culture, see Anselm Franke and Sabine Folie (eds.), *Animismus: Moderne hinter den Spiegeln* (Cologne: Walther König, 2011).

[46] See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

literature as a related critique of the modern hierarchy of the subject over the object and a charge to acknowledge the agency and active power of things.[47] Some have even suggested that modernist literary writings like those of Kafka demonstrate a theoretical "knowledge of things" somehow comparable to the recent theory of writers like Latour.[48]

In contrast to such readings, I can do no better than cite Caroline Walker Bynum's astute response to contemporary theories of the life and agency of things. In the context of her recent study of the miraculous and effective materiality of Christian devotional objects in the late medieval period, Bynum notes that "the search for a universal theory of how things act" frequently ignores the very theories of relations between subjects and objects that are historically contemporaneous to the things and representations being studied; and second, that recent theories treat the life of things too anthropomorphically and ignore the inherent estrangement and otherness of things that appears variously coded according to different historical understandings.[49] Taking a similar stance, my reading of the literary and cinematic animation of things in German modernism avoids imposing the structures of recent theory and instead pays close attention to the ways that modernists themselves conceived of the transformation of relations between humans and things. Instead of adopting Latour's meta-critique of the modern separation between subjects and

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[47] See, for example, Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006), pp. 45–49, and for his reading of Kafka's Odradek, pp. 50–54.

[48] See Uwe C. Steiner, "Widerstand im Gegenstand: Das literarische Wissen vom Ding am Beispiel Franz Kafkas," in *Literatur, Wissenschaft und Wissen seit der Epochenschwelle um 1800: Theorie – Epistemologie – komparatistische Fallstudien*, ed. Thomas Klinkert and Monika Neuhofer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 237–52.

[49] See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2011), pp. 280–84, quoted here, p. 280.

objects, the present study emphasizes modernism's own accounts and responses to this presumed rupture, by focusing on the dynamic interplay between conceptions of animation and reification, mimesis and mimicry, life, movement, and the uncanny in relation to literary and cinematic production of the early twentieth century.

1

A KINSHIP OF THINGS:
On Rilke's Mimetics, Poetry, and the Thingness of Art

Wodurch sind überhaupt Dinge mit uns
verwandt? Welches ist ihre Geschichte?

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Within German modernist literature, the most complex and enigmatic reflection on things can be found in the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. From his earliest texts of the late nineteenth century through his major poetry of the early 1920s, Rilke's writing displays a persistent and central preoccupation with man's relationship to things, formulated both in more general terms and with respect to specific material objects. His emphatic notion of the "thing" (*Ding*), the "Herzwort" of his entire oeuvre, as one early critic describes it, continues to fascinate readers due to its productive slippage between aesthetic, critical, and social functions within the poet's work, as well as its flexible inclusion of a wide variety of objects, including artworks and architecture, plants and animals, commodities, craft-objects, and everyday things.[50]

While Rilke's literary representations and considerations of things undergo significant transformations across different periods of his writing, they also demonstrate important continuities that correspond to the poet's anthropological grounding of human

[50] Quoted above, see Hermann Kunisch, *Rainer Maria Rilke und die Dinge* (Cologne: Balduin Pick, 1946), p. 9.

behavior and artistic production, on the one hand, and his critical diagnosis of modernity, on the other. Throughout his writings, Rilke contrasts the corrupted state of modern relations to objects—which he attributes variously to commodification, urban experience, and technological developments—with a more primary relationship, in which the intimate familiarities and mutual likenesses between humans and things are temporarily uncovered in the realms of aesthetic and childhood experience.[51] As I will argue, Rilke's often repeated—but overlooked—notions of a "similarity" (*Ähnlichkeit*), "kinship" (*Verwandtschaft*), or "mimicry" (*Mimikry*) between humans and things involve a complex set of mimetic registers, which are integral to both the poet's assessment of modern pathologies, as well as his understanding of the production and reception of art and poetry.

A more comprehensive reading of Rilke's emphatic notion of the "thing" (*Ding*) has presented a particular interpretive challenge, as it takes on radically different guises within different contexts. In Rilke's celebrated writings on Auguste Rodin and Paul Cézanne, and in his *Neue Gedichte* (1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908), for example, encounters with objects are attributed a largely edifying effect, whereby the perceiving subject gains a degree of calm and resolve through an immediate experience

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[51] For Rilke's pointed remarks on the distorting effects of modern technology and commodity exchange on the new status of things as "Schein-Dinge," or "Lebens-Attrappen," see his well-known letter, "An Witold Hulewicz, Sierre, 13. XI. 1925," in *Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. Rilke-Archiv in Weimar (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1950), p. 483. For related comments on the distorted, unreality of things in modernity, see also an earlier 1912 letter in Rilke, *Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 373: "Die Welt zieht sich ein; denn auch ihrerseits die Dinge tun dasselbe, indem sie ihre Existenz immer mehr in die Vibration des Geldes verlegen und sich dort eine Art Geistigkeit entwickeln, die schon jetzt ihre greifbare Realität übertrifft." Future references to this two-volume 1950 edition of Rilke's letters will appear parenthetically in the text as (*B*) followed by volume and page number.

and closeness with respect to the aesthetic representation of things.[52] In Rilke's contemporaneous work on his 1910 novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, and in letters documenting his first visits to Paris, by contrast, encounters with objects result in a traumatic breakdown of boundaries between animate and inanimate, self and other, human and thing. Malte's experience of finding an external object "at home inside [him]," for example, is not an edifying moment but rather a cause for sudden terror.[53] And in a later episode in the second half of the novel, the narrator describes the tormenting presence of seemingly animate things ("Dinge von beschränkten und regelmäßigen Gebrauchen[, die] sich ausspannen und sich lüstern und neugierig aneinander versuchen"), which appear to "ape" (*nachäffen*) the bad behavior of humans (*KA* III, 583).

The difficulty in reconciling these different representations of things is reinforced by the divergent approaches to reading Rilke's work. On the one hand, there exists a longstanding line of interpretation that reproduces the poet's own mystifying language of

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[52] On the edifying effects of the "art-thing" for the artist and others, see Rilke's June 24, 1907 letter to his wife Clara from Paris: "Darin liegt die ungeheure Hilfe des Kunstdings für das Leben dessen, der es machen muß – : daß es seine Zusammenfassung ist [...], der immer wiederkehrende, für ihn selbst gegebene Beweis seiner Einheit und Wahrhaftigkeit, der doch nur ihm selber sich zukehrt und nach außen anonym wirkt, namenlos, als Notwendigkeit nur, als Wirklichkeit, als Dasein" (*B* I, 172).

[53] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], in *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 3: *Prosa und Dramen*, ed. August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), p. 487. The object in question is the exposed interior wall of a demolished building. As will be discussed later on in the chapter, Malte's frightful encounter with the dirty and decaying surface of the domestic interior involves a traumatic breakdown between inner and outer brought on by a mimetic identification with the protagonist's own flayed nerves and exposed interiority. The passage quoted above reads: "Ich erkenne das alles hier, und darum geht es so ohne weiteres in mich ein: es ist zu Hause in mir." Subsequent references to the same four-volume *Kommentierte Ausgabe* (*KA*) of Rilke's works will be cited parenthetically in the text according to volume and page number.

"things" and his penchant for pre-modern artworks and craft-objects. On the other hand, a more productive set of readings has emerged in more recent years, stressing Rilke's acute sensitivity and insight into the ruptures of the modern subject in relation to the traumas of the city. Such divergent readings can be brought into productive dialogue, I would argue, by instead emphasizing the poet's understanding of a mimetic or imitative relationship between humans and things. While Rilke's early poetry frequently evokes a monistic union or ornamental entwinement between the human subject and the world of objects, after about 1902 this relationship to things becomes increasingly estranged and destabilized in Rilke's prose, poetry, aesthetic writings, and letters. Coinciding with his first extended residence in Paris, the joint experiences of the tumultuous big city and the artistic production of Rodin led Rilke to develop a bifurcated understanding of the human relationship to external objects. Based on his observations of Rodin's sculptural production, Rilke comes to privilege the sculptor's immediate, tactile connection to his artwork and other objects of the world. Asserting a close "kinship" (*Verwandtschaft*) between Rodin's sculpture and a much longer history of handmade objects, Rilke identifies a certain atavistic quality to the sculptor's relationship with things, corresponding to the mimetic behavior of both children and early humans. In contrast to these more positively coded, onto- and phylogenetic forms of mimesis, Rilke's personal account of life in Paris presents a far more destructive side to mimetic relations linked to the fragmentation, dissolution, and voiding of the self. In reconstructing these ambivalent mimetic registers in Rilke's writing, I will also show how his development of a new poetry of things or "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*) can be read as an attempt to artificially

produce and control a more positive mimetic resemblance between humans and things, which appeared to be dying out or distorted in modern life.

The concept of mimesis being drawn on here corresponds to the revival of mimetic theory in the early twentieth century, marked by a departure from the more traditional concerns of aesthetic verisimilitude, which began with Plato and Aristotle and were carried through in traditions of illusionist imitation and in nineteenth-century norms of literary and visual realism. In the early twentieth-century theories of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Roger Caillois, the mimetic reemerges not as a narrow category of aesthetic representation, but rather as a more broadly construed relational practice. Here, mimesis comes to include all manner of human behavior involved in producing similarities (as in astrology, dance, "primitive" magic, and the play of children), as well as a somatic and sensuous closeness to the world, which undermines a strong separation between subject and object, human and thing. In Benjamin, Adorno, and Caillois, albeit in different ways, the mimetic also takes on a darker connotation, as an unreflected compulsion to become and behave similarly to others and one's surroundings, a compulsion that threatens humans with both self-annihilation and mass manipulation. This ambivalent status of mimesis makes it a powerful, conceptual tool for understanding Rilke's understanding of relations between humans and things in both their positive and pathological forms.

In scattered writings after 1930, Benjamin, Adorno, and Caillois all sought different ways of restoring to the theory of mimesis its ancient association with a primary, human tendency towards imitative and mimetic behavior, a move that had already become a central feature in sociological and psychological theories of imitation

and identification from around 1900 (in the work of Gabriel Tarde and Sigmund Freud, most notably).[54] What Rilke shares with these early twentieth-century theories is both an anthropological grounding of human nature in mimesis, and the recognition of an inherent ambivalence or instability in mimetic behavior, particularly in its modern manifestations. In relation to Caillois's work on mimicry, Rilke identifies a similar drive to become thing-like and imitate one's surroundings, a strategy leading to both self-preservation and increased endangerment. Thus in the 1901 poem, "Der Schauende," the suggestion is given for surviving a violent storm: "ließen wir, ähnlicher den Dingen, / uns *so* vom großen Sturm bezwingen, – / wir würden weit und namenlos" (*KA* I, 332). Alternatively, in a 1903 letter, Rilke describes the suffering and decay of the Parisian populace as, "das trostlose, mißfarbene Mimicry der übergroßen Städte," which, like Caillois, he compares to the biological adaptations of animals (and insects in particular).[55]

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[54] The original connection between artistic representation and human social behavior in theories of mimesis can be found in Book X of Plato's *Republic*. Around 1900, this social aspect of mimesis was revived in Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* [1890], trans. E. C. Parsons (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962); and in Freud's theories of identification and projection found in his *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* [1913] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991). For a broader history of the concept of mimesis with chapters devoted to both Benjamin and Adorno, see Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Kultur, Kunst, Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992), here, pp. 374–405.

[55] Rainer Maria Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1975), p. 67. Hereafter cited as *Bw*. Caillois's principle account of mimesis and mimicry can be found in his, "Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire," *Minotaure* 7 (1935): pp. 5–10. Here, Caillois bases his theory of mimicry on sociobiological parallels between mimetic behavior in animals and humans, an assumption strongly criticized by Adorno in his review of Roger Caillois, *La Mante religieuse*, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7 (1938): pp. 410–11. For Rilke however, the similarities between human behavior and the mimetic adaptations of animals were obvious. In the same letter, he describes observing Parisians as if they were, "eine neue Art Thier, dem die Noth besondere Organe ausgebildet hat, Hunger- und Sterbeorgane. Und sie [...] hielten aus unter dem Fuß jedes Tages der sie trat wie zähe Käfer, dauerten, als ob sie noch auf etwas warten müßten" (*Bw* 67).

In relation to Adorno's thinking on mimesis, Rilke similarly privileges a haptic or somatic closeness with the world of things, particularly in his *Neue Gedichte* and writings on Rodin; while in *Malte*, a somatic closeness with things has the potential to slip over into a dangerous merging of self and other, similar to accounts of mimesis in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.[56] If Giorgio Agamben's reading is to be trusted, another passage in Rilke's *Malte* might also be compared with Adorno's sense of a thoroughly negative form of mimesis (*Mimesis ans Verhärtete und Entfremdete*) brought on by the alienating powers of reification and the commodity form.[57] Quoting Malte's statement on, "wie verwirrend der Umgang mit den Menschen auf die Dinge gewirkt hat" (*KA* III, 582), Agamben reads a strange animated tin object in the novel as related to the distorting effects of things turned into commodities.[58]

For the time being, the larger point to be made here is simply that Rilke's emphatic notion of the "thing" (*Ding*) need not be reproached as some romantic mystification or as evidence of the poet's obliviousness to the modern world. By reading this emphasis on things in terms of mimetic relations, it can be wrested from a more

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[56] Malte's experience of Paris as smelling of fear (*KA* III, 455), for example, can be productively compared with Adorno's mimetic conception of smell as a voiding of the self through a complete identification with the other. See Theodor W. Adorno [and Max Horkheimer], *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* [1947], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 208–9. In a related passage in *Malte*, the narrator describes: "Die Existenz des Entsetzlichen in jedem Bestandteil der Luft. Du atmest es ein mit Durchsichtigem; in dir aber schlägt es sich nieder, wird hart, nimmt spitze, geometrische Formen an zwischen den Organen" (*KA* III, 505).

[57] Quoted here, Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 39.

[58] See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* [1977], trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 47. Elsewhere, Agamben refers to the same 1912 letter quoted in footnote 52 as evidence of Rilke's awareness of the ghostly dissolution of things due to the money economy (p. 38).

obscure position within Rilke's larger body of writing and be apprehended not only for its positive, restorative dimensions, but also as an expression of modern pathologies, both social and experiential. Such a reading does more than reconcile the seemingly contradictory sides of Rilke's literary treatment of things. It also helps to place such reflections historically, as roughly contemporaneous with developments in early twentieth-century theories of mimesis (from strictly aesthetic theories of mimetic representation to psychological and anthropological insights into the nature of mimetic behavior). While Rilke lacks the theoretical rigor and dialectical sophistication of thinkers like Benjamin and Adorno, his representations of mimetic relations between humans and things anticipate key aspects of their later theories of mimesis, and do so in relation to concrete observations regarding the fate of things in modern society, the experiential ruptures of urban modernity, and the production and reception of art. In this manner, Rilke's numerous literary, aesthetic, and personal reflections on things can be understood in terms of an open-ended exploration of mimetic relations, as well as a poetic struggle to shore up a more positive sense of mimesis and mimicry against the depravations of the modern.

As I will work out later on in the chapter, a comparison with Benjamin's writings on the "mimetic faculty" is particularly instructive for elucidating Rilke's conception of a "kinship" (*Verwandtschaft*) between humans and things. The theory of mimesis as developed in "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" and "Über das mimetische Vermögen" (both 1933) is, of course, an outgrowth of Benjamin's earlier philosophy of language, which is quite foreign to Rilke's own concern with things.[59] However, Benjamin's discussion of

"sensuous similarities" (*sinnliche Ähnlichkeiten*), in their onto- and phylogenetic forms, bears a striking resemblance to Rilke's own conception of relations to things.[60] Like Benjamin, as I will show, Rilke develops a speculative history of man's mimetic relations with things, which links the imitative play of children with magical correspondences in the beliefs of early man. Like Benjamin, Rilke also privileges a haptic closeness with things that he locates most strongly in childhood experience.

Where they differ, however, is in their response to the historical fate of mimesis and mimicry. Benjamin describes the disappearance of "sensuous similarity" in its phylogenetic form, and an historical transformation of the mimetic faculty into the "nonsensuous similarities" of language. While Rilke also acknowledges an historical change in the mimetic relations between humans and things, he nevertheless maintains the latent possibility of a positive sensuousness of mimetic correspondence in opposition to its modern, distorted and pathological forms. For Benjamin, the older phylogenetic form of mimesis can only be glimpsed via memories of similar behavior in childhood. Rilke insists, however, that it can also be re-actualized through the experience of art, a claim he underscores by his frequent comparisons between aesthetic and childhood experience. The important question is not whether Rilke errs here in his historical understanding, but rather how this understanding shapes his conception of aesthetic

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[59] On the relation between language and things in Benjamin's early theory of language, see "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" [1916], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 140–56. See also, Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980).

[60] Cf. Benjamin, "Über das mimetische Vermögen" [1933], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1, pp. 210–13; and, in the same volume, an earlier version of the text, "Lehre vom Ähnlichen" [1933], pp. 204–10.

production and reception more generally, and his own poetic practice in particular. In this way, Rilke's discussion of things in relation to poetry and the visual arts appears as a tentative struggle against the kind of historical loss later described in Benjamin's work on the "mimetic faculty." Ironically, Rilke's own struggle to account for the mimetic powers he finds latent in Rodin's sculptural works leads him back to spoken and poetic language as a means of evoking such mimetic relations—an implicit admission that such relations were already impossible and could only be artificially staged and produced through the medium of language.

This approach to understanding Rilke's conception of the thing departs significantly from previous readings, and only forcefully emerges with a broader consideration of his writings. In both popular reception and professional Rilke scholarship, the poet's emphatic notion of the "Ding" has been most closely associated with the poetry of his middle period, and with his *Neue Gedichte* (1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908), in particular. While the popular designation of these poems as "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*) has been frequently called into question, critics continue to emphasize their status as "Dinglyrik," or thing-centered poetry, involving, if not the ekphrasis or objective description of things, then the poetic rendering of their experiential encounter by the human subject.[61] Here, the focus has been not so much on the things themselves, but rather on how Rilke's poetry represents and reflects upon aesthetic experience and visual perception through dynamic inversions of subject and object, inner and outer perspectives, and epiphanic transformations in the perception of

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[61] For an overview of relevant scholarship, see notes in the *Kommentierte Ausgabe*, vol. 1, pp. 904–17; and Wolfgang G. Müller's commentary in the *Rilke-Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung*, ed. Manfred Engel (Weimar: Metzler, 2004), pp. 296–99.

things.[62] In analyzing the visual and perceptual dimensions of Rilke's *Dinglyrik*, critics have frequently emphasized the strong connection between his *Neue Gedichte* and contemporaneous engagement with the visual arts of Rodin and Cézanne between 1902 and 1907, and also speculated, more tentatively, on overlaps with developments in the emerging field of phenomenology.[63] Quite often, Rilke's repeated references to things have been subsumed under discussions of his contemporaneous project of "learning to see" (*sehen lernen*) as expressed in his letters on Rodin and Cézanne, and, most famously, in his 1910 *Malte* novel. While these lines of interpretation have been productive for understanding certain aspects of the *Neue Gedichte*, they have also prevented a better understanding of Rilke's more idiosyncratic notion of the *Ding*, which supposes a more primordial relationship between humans and nonhumans, in which the boundaries between subject and object, persons and things, are not so clearly defined.

Already in 1900, in the programmatic poem, "Fortschritt," later published in the first part of *Das Buch der Bilder* (1902), Rilke himself suggests a differentiation between concerns over visual immediacy, on the one hand, and a kinship with things, on the other: "Immer verwandter werden mir die Dinge / und alle Bilder immer angeschauter" (*KA* I, 284). By looking at both earlier and later writings, as well as the *Malte* novel from the

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[62] Still the most thorough study in this regard is Judith Ryan, *Umschlag und Verwandlung: Poetische Struktur und Dichtungstheorie in R. M. Rilkes Lyrik der mittleren Periode (1907–1914)* (Munich: Winkler, 1972).

[63] The close relationship between Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* and the visual arts is a commonplace in critical scholarship. Some insightful work has also followed up on Käte Hamburger's phenomenological reading of the *Neue Gedichte*. See her, "Die phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes," in *Rilke in neuer Sicht*, ed. Käte Hamburger (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 83–158; and more recently, Wolfgang G. Müller, "Rilke, Husserl und die Dinglyrik der Moderne," in *Rilke und die Weltliteratur*, ed. Manfred Engel and Dieter Lamping (Düsseldorf and Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 1999), pp. 214–35.

Paris period, Rilke's conception of the *Ding* can be decoupled from more familiar associations with visual experience, and be resituated, instead, as a central component in his anthropological conception of mimetic relations between humans and art-objects, and humans and things more generally, where visual perception is only but one of its aspects. Following that, a return to Rilke's more concentrated reflections on things in the *Neue Gedichte*, and in his letters and aesthetic writings of the Paris period, will allow for a stronger rereading of these texts in terms of the staging and performing of mimetic thing-relations.[64]

Rilke's writings on Auguste Rodin between 1902 and 1907 occupy a central position in this discussion, as it is here that the poet develops his understanding of art as a *making of things*. Through a careful study of Rodin and his work in Paris, Rilke fashions an image of an ideal artistic practice, which merges art and life in a daily craft-like production of "art-things" (*Kunst-Dinge*), and which entails an artisanal absorption in work that grants the artist a kind of obstinate, *thingly* resistance to incursions of the urban surroundings. As will become clear later on in the chapter, Rilke's traumatic experiences during his early stays in Paris motivate this fashioning of Rodin as a maker of things. Through close readings of his personal letters and published writing on Rodin, I will show further how Rilke's language implies an ideal mimetic resemblance between the sculptor and his work, whereby the artist takes on a more thing-like character in

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[64] For insightful readings that focus on different aspects of visual immediacy in the textual production of Rilke's Paris period, see Stefanie Harris, "Exposures: Rilke, Photography, and the City," *New German Critique* 99 (Fall 2006): pp. 121–49; and Tobias Wilke, "Überschriebene Präsenzen: Rilke vor/nach Cézanne," in *Lehrer ohne Lehre: Zur Rezeption Paul Cézannes in Künsten, Wissenschaft und Kultur (1906–2006)*, ed. Torsten Hoffmann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2008), pp. 151–67.

resemblance to the sculptural work. When focusing on the aesthetic experience of Rodin's works, particularly in his 1905/06 lecture on the sculptor, Rilke likewise imagines a mimetic relationship between the viewer and artwork, comparing an interaction with Rodin's sculpture to the mimetic and animistic play of children and to the experience of manmade things in the earliest periods of human existence. By evoking relations to objects in childhood experience as well as the early history of humans (just as Benjamin does), Rilke situates a reception of Rodin's sculpture, not in terms of an imitative representation of nature, truth, or beauty, as in prior theories of aesthetic mimesis, but rather in terms of the mimetic relations it facilitates among humans and things (*KA* IV, 455–57).

Integral to his lecture on Rodin is Rilke's attempt to restore to the present a lost awareness of the thingness of art, which he claims was a primal experience in the very earliest instances of artistic production. According to Rilke, the very first manmade objects, whether "Werkzeuge" or "Götterbilder," were produced with an acute awareness of their alternate temporality and otherness as *things*: the artwork being first experienced as, "ein Nicht-Mitsterbendes […], ein Dauerndes, ein Nächsthöheres: Ein Ding" (*KA* IV, 456). And yet despite the work's temporal otherness, its undying persistence among the world of things, it still bore human traces and a resemblance to its maker. For Rilke, the early work of art was not primarily a beautiful thing, but rather: "Ein ähnliches. Ein Ding, darin man das wiedererkannte was man liebte und das was man fürchtete und das Unbegreifliche in alledem" (*KA* IV, 456). A recognition of oneself in the artwork persisted, despite its mute and self-contained thingness, its indifference to the mortal life of humans. For Rilke, a similarly strange kinship with things could be recalled in

childhood play, where one's "childhood things" (*Kinder-Dinge*) could at once be intimately identified with, and yet later—marking an ultimate difference with the mortal human—slip indifferently away as worthless, forgotten, and unchanging things (*KA* IV, 455–56).

The child's immediate, haptic experience of objects also provides a model for Rilke's understanding of sculpture as things. As he explains in the Rodin lecture and elsewhere, sculpture is ideally experienced for its simple thingness, as a system of tactile surfaces and concrete, material weight. Regardless of the figure or theme of the work, "je länger man hinsieht, desto mehr vereinfacht sich auch dieser Inhalt, und man sieht: Dinge" (*KA* IV, 460). Rilke attributes to Rodin in particular the ability both to experience external objects as simple surfaces and to give this kind of apprehension of things a lasting, material form in his work. The experience of the artwork awakens—for the viewer as well—a related haptic and sensuous immediacy with respect to the surface of all things. Finally, the thingness of art implies for Rilke an overall, positive mimetic relationality, which ties the work not only to its maker and environment of its making, but also to a whole network of "art-things," forming what Rilke calls in a 1903 letter, "eine weite stille Verwandtschaft von Dingen" (*Bw* 102). This "kinship of things," as Rilke imagines it, links Rodin and his work through family-like relations to a whole "Dynastie großer Dinge" and a "Geschichte unendlicher Geschlechter von Dingen," forming a vast kinship of relations among artworks of the present and distant past (*Bw* 102, 111).

In all of these dimensions of Rilke's *Kunst-Ding*, the thingness of the work lies both in its broad mimetic relationality to both humans and other objects, as well as its

fundamental distinction from the mortal existence of humans. As an undying thing, the artwork gives a lasting, material form to these connections of mimetic closeness and resemblance (preserved from earlier onto- and phylogenetic stages of human development), and enables such mimetic relations to be re-actualized through aesthetic experience in the present. In light of a perceived corruption of things in his own time, Rilke attributes to art the ability to enact this sort of positive kinship with things, and to stabilize an otherwise threatening intrusion of a hostile nonhuman realm. The successful artwork, for Rilke, can thus be understood as a generative nexus for producing positive, mimetic resemblances among humans and things, and for provoking in the recipient of the work a broader recognition of sensuous similarity. In his 1905/06 Rodin lecture, Rilke attempts to stage for his audience this type of idealized encounter with artworks, by evoking their childhood relations with things and appealing to the experience of manmade objects in early human history.

This recognition of mimetic relations as central to Rilke's understanding of things also provides a new basis for productively rereading his famous "thing-poems." In many of his poetic works from the two-volume *Neue Gedichte*, Rilke develops complex, poetic strategies for performing for the reader the kind of idealized, mimetic kinship he imagines between humans and things. Acutely aware of a dark, destructive side to thing-relations during his early stays in Paris, Rilke looks to his poetry as a means of artificially producing and rehabilitating a more positive, mimetic closeness between humans and things. Much of Rilke's thing-centered poetry, in other words, can be read as staging an artificially controlled encounter with things, as an implicit alternative to the distorted, mimetic relations and destructive merging of self and other, prevailing in modern life.

I will turn to a close reading of selected poems from the *Neue Gedichte* at the end of the chapter. For now, Rilke's "Die Rosenschale" can serve as a particularly lucid example of this poetic strategy. As the poem opens, it presents to the reader two disparate objects: first, the writhing tangle of two viciously fighting boys; second, the calming and edifying presence of a full bowl of roses. Implicit in this poetic juxtaposition is a notion of a contrasting, mimetic correspondence between perceiver and perceived—that a thing filled with anger and fear produces a similar state in the viewer, and that other objects produce different likenesses:

> Zornige sahst du flackern, sahst zwei Knaben
> zu einem Etwas sich zusammenballen,
> das Haß war und sich auf der Erde wälzte
> wie ein von Bienen überfallnes Tier.
>
> Nun aber weißt du, wie sich das vergißt:
> denn vor dir steht die volle Rosenschale,
> die unvergeßlich ist und angefüllt
> mit jenem Äußersten von Sein und Neigen,
> Hinhalten, Niemals-Gebenkönnen, Dastehn,
> das unser sein mag: Äußerstes auch uns. (*KA* I, 508–9)

In addressing the reader directly with "you" (*du*), Rilke's poem attempts to stage a particular experience of these contrasting things, and, at the same time, to perform for its reader a related *becoming akin* with them. The poem purposefully replaces the fearful "something" (*Etwas*) of the fighting boys with another object in order to demonstrate its transformative effect. What readers are first led to experience in the bowl of roses itself, that is, a filled presence of being and offering, can be similarly manifested through mimetic correspondence in the inner state of perceiving humans (*Äußerstes auch uns*).

As the poem proceeds, it provokes the reader's mimetic capabilities even further, encouraging one to not only become like the bowl of roses, but to perceive in it a whole network of sensuous similarities and interconnections. "Ist irgend etwas uns bekannt wie

dies?" the poem asks of the roses, and suggests to the reader a series of likenesses: the white rose, "wie eine Venus aufrecht in der Muschel"; the cambric rose, "ist sie kein Kleid"; and another, like "opalnes Porzellan, zerbrechlich, eine flache Chinatasse" (*KA* I, 509–10). Rilke's comparisons distinguish themselves from usual poetic metaphors in that they are presented as open-ended suggestions, as encouragement for the reader to recognize further similarities in their own perception of things.[65] As the poem concludes, it imparts to the reader a transformative awareness, not only of resemblances among humans and things, but also of the interconnections (with wind, rain, sky, and earth) that are contained and enclosed in all natural things.[66] The poem thus performs for the reader a full scope of positive, mimetic relations, and does so in explicit opposition to a destructive identification with the initial fear-causing thing.

While Rilke's poetry explores this mimetic kinship with things in mainly aesthetic and perceptual terms, the reception history of the *Neue Gedichte*—particularly in the 1920s—underscores the relevance of these literary works in relation to broader, socio-critical reflections on the "state of things" in modernity. Around the time of Rilke's death in 1926, there arose a renewed interest in the *Neue Gedichte*, which were frequently read as a poetic attempt at preserving things against the destruction of modern technologies,

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[65] The poem is punctuated by further questions and suggestions, offering readers a sense of tactile closeness and correspondence with things, while encouraging them to explore their own mimetic capabilities: "Und dann wie dies: daß ein Gefühl entsteht, / weil Blütenblätter Blütenblätter rühren? / [...] Und die Bewegung in den Rosen, sieh: / [...] Was können sie nicht sein" (*KA* I, 509–10).

[66] "Und sind nicht alle so, nur sich enthaltend, / wenn Sich-enthalten heißt: die Welt da draußen / und Wind und Regen und Geduld des Frühlings / und Schuld und Unruh und vermummtes Schicksal / und Dunkelheit der abendlichen Erde / bis auf der Wolken Wandel, Flucht und Anflug, / bis auf den vagen Einfluß ferner Sterne / in eine Hand voll Innres verwandeln" (*KA* I, 510).

and restoring an intimate closeness with things, which had become estranged in modern life. Before turning to his poetry and writings before 1910, I will show how Rilke's reputation as a poet of things and a writer of "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*) emerges historically out of the politically and socially convulsive Weimar period amidst broader reflections on the corrupted relationship between humans and things in modernity. By first framing my analysis with respect to Rilke's historical reception in the 1920s, I hope not only to bring out more forcefully the implied, social and recuperative dimensions of Rilke's performative *Dinglyrik* (alongside its more familiar, aesthetic concerns), but also to establish the poet's writing as part of a prehistory to the extensive, theoretical concerns with things that arise in the Weimar period: including Martin Heidegger's discussion of things and equipment in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Georg Lukács's long essay on reification, *Das Phänomen der Verdinglichung* (1923), Walter Benjamin's writings on commodities and mimetic thing-relations, and the new status of things in cinema and the interwar avant-garde. If Bill Brown is correct in identifying a pervasive "discourse of things" in the 1920s, then Rilke must certainly be included as an important early instance of what Brown calls, "modernism's resistance to modernity […] its effort to deny the distinction between subjects and objects, people and things."[67]

The Poet of Things

As Robert Musil was quick to remark, the death of Rainer Maria Rilke on December 29, 1926 was met with a noticeably muted response from the German daily press.[68] In the

[67] See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): pp. 1–22, here p. 12.

early months of 1927, however, numerous literary critics and writers, Musil included, followed up with their own commemorative speeches and publications, which, in the majority of instances, argued for Rilke's inclusion among the pantheon of great German lyrical poets, and claimed further, on behalf of a still devoted and admiring readership, an intimate familiarity with the man and his work.[69] At the same time, what the widespread commemoration of the poet's life and work also underscored was the apparent disconnect between Rilke's aspirations as a modern lyrical poet and the particular historical realities of mass culture and sociopolitical life in 1920s Germany. In contrasting ways, both conservative literary critics and the more progressive modernist writers of the time sought to portray Rilke as a writer apart: a poet who maintained popularity among an educated readership, but whose major poetic works were marked by an uneasy remove from the pressing social, political, and cultural concerns of the Weimar period. In Musil's commemorative address, he honored Rilke as, "der größte Lyriker [...], den die Deutschen seit dem Mittelalter besessen haben," yet he was careful to qualify this honor.[70] For Musil and others, the poet's literary contributions remained largely peripheral to their immediate historical context, and were perhaps best understood as but the belated end to a particularly German demand for "dichterische Größe." While Rilke could be said to have achieved a kind of "perfection" (*Vollkommenheit*) with respect to

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[68] Robert Musil, "Rede zur Rilke-Feier in Berlin am 16. Januar 1927," in *Prosa und Stücke, Kleine Prosa, Aphorismen, Autobiographisches, Essays und Reden, Kritik*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2 (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2000), p. 1229.

[69] See, for example, articles and speeches collected in the commemorative Rilke edition of the literary journal, *Orplid: Literarische Monatsschrift in Sonderheften* 3.1/2, ed. Martin Rockenbach (April–May 1927).

[70] Musil, "Rede zur Rilke-Feier," p. 1229.

the history of German lyric poetry, this achievement appeared untimely and at odds with the more politically and socially-oriented literary concerns of the 1920s.[71]

In an attempt to place Rilke's poetic contributions in closer dialogue with the aesthetic and social demands of the time, Musil and other commentators, such as Walter Benjamin and the Swiss writer Robert Faesi, turned their attention away from the poet's accomplished later works, the *Duineser Elegien* (1923) and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1923), and instead focused on the earlier collections, especially the *Neue Gedichte* (1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908), as evidence of Rilke's particular sensitivity to the world of natural and artisanal objects and his concerns over the relationship between humans and things. What has since become commonplace in popular and critical understandings of Rilke's two volumes of *Neue Gedichte*—that is, their status as "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*), characterized by an in-depth attention to the material forms and effects of artworks, architecture, animals, flowers, and everyday things—itself emerged as a new point of interest in the poet's reception of the 1920s. While current scholarship predictably stresses the relationship between Rilke's *Dinglyrik* and his contemporaneous study of the visual arts,[72] critics of the Weimar period

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[71] Ibid., pp. 1230–31. The circumstances surrounding Musil's speech only further demonstrate the particular ambivalence that the poet's remembrance provoked at the time. Speaking as a member of a loose but prominent association of leftist writers, the "Gruppe 1925," Musil represented a decidedly more generous and sympathetic view of the poet when compared with his other politically and socially minded peers. The speech itself was the outcome of heated debate on whether to honor the deceased poet at all. In Alfred Döblin's later account, Brecht was the most fiercely opposed. Other prominent members of the literary group included Ernst Bloch, Max Brod, Hermann Kasack, Erwin Piscator, and Joseph Roth. See documentation in Klaus Petersen, *Die „Gruppe 1925": Geschichte und Soziologie einer Schriftstellervereinigung* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1981), here, p. 79.

[72] The comparison between the *Neue Gedichte* and Rilke's contemporaneous writings on Rodin and Cézanne occurs far too frequently to survey here. For more recent examples, see Bernard

frequently attributed to the *Neue Gedichte* a number of important social and critical functions in addition to their visual, aesthetic effects. Following a previous decade of criticism that read Rilke's work largely in religious and metaphysical terms,[73] the reception of the 1920s assessed his poetry of things not only in terms of their sensory immediacy with respect to unique material objects, but also as a productive literary strategy for restoring and preserving the interrelationships and familiarity among humans and things, which appeared otherwise threatened in an era of urbanization, mechanization, and mass society.

This renewed interest during the Weimar years—in Rilke's near-devotional attention to the things of nature, art, and everyday life in the *Neue Gedichte*—can be explained, at least in part, with respect to the period's dominant critical discourses on reification, commodities, and modern technologies. Situated with respect to the political and economic instability of the interwar years, rapid developments in industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization, and a general environment of cold, calculating rationality in social relations, there emerged at the time a number of important, theoretical discussions that sought to analyze modern social pathologies in terms of a

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Dieterle, "Plastisches Schreiben bei Rainer Maria Rilke," and Brigid Doherty, "Introjektion, Übertragung, und literarische Medienreflexionen in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Briefe über Cézanne*," in *Literarische Medienreflexionen: Künste und Medien im Fokus moderner und postmoderner Literatur*, ed. Sandra Poppe and Sasche Seiler (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2008), pp. 27–39 and 40–64, respectively.

[73] In monographs, reviews, and scholarly articles before 1920, the predominant focus was on religious, mystical, and pantheistic readings of Rilke's literary works, encouraged by earlier monastic and religious themes of his popular *Stunden-Buch* (written 1899-1903, published 1905). See, for example, Heinrich Scholz, "Rainer Maria Rilke: Ein Beitrag zur Erkenntnis und Würdigung des dichterischen Pantheismus der Gegenwart," in *Festschrift für Alois Riehl* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1914), pp. 3–42. Scholz praises what he calls "das Evangelium der Dinge" in Rilke's *Stunden-Buch*, and derides his *Neue Gedichte* as mere evidence of the poet's eventual decline into "religiöse Erschöpfung" (pp. 10 and 42). For listings of other early criticism, cf. Walter Ritzer, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Bibliographie* (Vienna: O. Kerry, 1951), pp. 208–318.

corrupted relationship among humans and things. These included, most notably, Georg Lukács's chapter on reification in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923), and Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927), which attempted a philosophical restoration of man's primordial relations with "things" (*Dinge*) and "equipment" (*Zeug*), in opposition to scientific objectivity and the subject/object distinction.[74] As Rilke's letters indicate, he situated his own literary dedication to pre-industrial, handmade objects in explicit opposition to the "Schein-Dinge" of modern, capitalistic society (*B* II, 483).[75] While Adorno would later dismiss Rilke's "Dingkult" as merely an instance of "die reale Gewalt der Verdinglichung,"[76] for writers and critics of the Weimar period, his *Neue Gedichte* provided a welcome occasion for re-imagining a far less alienated relationship with the world of things.

As Tobias Wilke has recently pointed out, for Walter Benjamin in particular, a critical diagnosis of the historical "state of things" in 1920s Europe could be analyzed

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[74] See Georg Lukács, "Das Phänomen der Verdinglichung" [1923], in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), pp. 257–86; and Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [1927] (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), especially, pp. 63–76. It is instructive that Axel Honneth's recent revival of reification theory attempts to put Lukács and Heidegger in productive dialogue in order to uncover the possibility of a more primary, non-reified life praxis characterized by "care" (*Sorge*) in everyday interactions among humans and things. Despite criticisms of his argument, Honneth's blending of Lukács's and Heidegger's work of the 1920s attests to this historical period's strong investment in working out more fundamental forms of human-thing relations not dominated by scientific objectivity, instrumentality, or the exchange of commodities and money. See Axel Honneth, *Verdinglichung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

[75] Heidegger cites the same 1925 letter at length in his 1946 lecture, "Wozu Dichter?," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), p. 291.

[76] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" [1957], in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 49–68, here p. 52.

both in a figurative and literal sense.[77] Under the heading "Gedanken zu einer Analysis des Zustands von Mitteleuropa," Benjamin composed the following short text in 1923:

> I. Der Zustand der Dinge
>
> Gänzliches Schwinden der Wärme aus ihnen. Die Gegenstände des täglichen Gebrauchs stoßen den Menschen sacht aber beharrlich von sich ab. In summa hat er tagtäglich in der Überwindung der geheimen Widerstände – und nicht etwa nur der offenen – die sie ihm entgegensetzen, eine ungeheure Arbeit zu leisten. Ihre Kälte muß er mit der eigenen Wärme ausgleichen, um nicht an ihnen zu erstarren und ihre Stacheln mit unendlicher Geschicklichkeit anfassen um nicht an ihnen zu verbluten.[78]

In this passage, which would later be reworked and expanded in his 1928 montage-text, *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin finds expression for his more large-scale analysis of modern, social pathologies in the degenerate state of everyday objects themselves. As he elaborates in the longer passage from *Einbahnstraße,* this "Entartung der Dinge" is replicated as well in the corresponding "roughness" (*Roheit*) of humans, leading to a general social environment of cool and prickly repulsion.[79]

While Benjamin was largely indifferent to Rilke's poetic works, attributing their effects to the dated, turn-of-the-century ornamentation of *Jugendstil*, he did come to the defense of particular poems of the *Neue Gedichte*. After reading Franz Blei's harshly critical assessment of the recently deceased poet in the January 7, 1927 edition of *Die Literarische Welt*, Benjamin put down some of his own reflections on the "tactile beauty" of poems like "L'Ange du Méridien" and "Archaïscher Torso Apollos" from the *Neue*

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[77] See Tobias Wilke, *Medien der Unmittelbarkeit: Dingkonzepte und Wahrnehmungstechniken, 1918–1939* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), pp. 13–14.

[78] Walter Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße* [1928], *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8, ed. Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 134.

[79] Ibid., p. 26. On the discourse of "coldness" in the arts and sociology of the Weimar period, see Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

Gedichte. He describes these and other such poems as, "Lieder von der vollendeten taktilen Schönheit von Früchten; Strophen, die sich als Lied im Sinn der Griechen von Hand zu Hand wie eine Schale, eine Scherbe geben lassen," and makes further appeal to "die Hände einer Generation" that were brought together by the collective handling of these poetic things.[80] While Benjamin shows no remorse that, as he claims, lyrical poetry had long ago come to an end in Europe, he nevertheless revisits Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* with an attention not only to their suggestions of thingly contours and haptic textures, but also to their social character in mediating the sensibilities and interpersonal relations of a generation of readers. Benjamin's appeal to human warmth and tactile contact with things in the above 1923 fragment, "Der Zustand der Dinge," makes clear why, upon Rilke's death, he would reserve praise for the writer's earlier poetry of things—as a potentially restorative counter-measure to the coldness and repulsion among people and things that appeared to arise in the interwar years.

From a conservative perspective, the Swiss writer Robert Faesi likewise appealed to a generation of readers with an intimate connection to the things of Rilke's poetry, but provided a different and far more pessimistic image of the historical "state of things." In his commemorative address for the poet, delivered in Zürich and Stuttgart in early 1927, Faesi remarked:

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[80] Walter Benjamin, "Rainer Maria Rilke und Franz Blei" [1927], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4.1, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 453–54, here p. 454. In his brief discussion of the poet, Benjamin also ridicules the "verwesende Innerlichkeit" of Rilke's earlier poetry, which he associates "mit den Emblemen des Jugendstils." A complete reprint of Franz Blei's 1927 article on Rilke can be found in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4.2, pp. 1025–27. Blei's review offers a highly critical assessment of Rilke's detachment from present historical realities, which was commonly noted at the time: "Die Problematik Rilkes war ganz Interieur immer geblieben, er schaute mit seinen großen blassen Augen in die Landschaft aus dem einzigen Fenster eines Zimmers, in dem es ganz leise nach Kranksein roch und aus dem er sich in ein bukolisches Idyll sehnte" (p. 1025).

> aus [Rilkes Werk] steigt der wehe Duft der verfallenden Dinge [...]. Und Zerfall in den Büchern der Bilder und der Dinge, die der Lyriker vor uns aufschlägt: das Verwittern alter Kathedralen und Schlösser, das Überwuchern vergessener Sarkophage, das Welken der Astern in den Beeten vereinsamter Parke, das Nachdunkeln und Verbleichen der Ahnenbilder, das Gilben der Handschriften, das Erblinden schöner Augen [...]. Das längst vergangene, das noch immer vergehende – seinem Untergang gibt der Dichter Dauer im Wort. All das ist Kunst des Endes, all das ist Kennzeichen einer ganzen Generation.[81]

In Faesi's account, Rilke thus becomes the chronicler and poetic preservationist for a whole catalog of neglected and disintegrating objects that have already been left behind by the early twentieth century. In contrast to Benjamin, the function of Rilke's poetry lies here not in a vision of restored immediacy between human and things, but rather in the resigned preservation, in the poetic word, of a whole world of disappearing objects.[82]

It should come as no surprise that the now well-known literary term of the "thing-poem" (*Dinggedicht*) had its origins in the 1920s as well. In an article published the same year as Rilke's death, the German literary scholar Kurt Oppert developed a general classification for the type of descriptive, thing-centered poetry he found first in the late work of Eduard Mörike, in certain poems of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and finally, in its fully realized form, in the *Neue Gedichte* of Rainer Maria Rilke. In contrast to the subjective, emotional content of lyrical poetry following Goethe, Oppert posited a, "Gegentypus [...], der auf unpersönliche episch-objektive Beschreibung eines Seienden

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[81] Faesi's *Gedenkrede* can be found printed in *Orplid* 3 (April–May 1927): pp. 13–23, here pp. 15–16. While Faesi's list indeed evokes many of the same objects represented in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*, the general tone of decadence and disintegration in the passage is perhaps more easily aligned with the late nineteenth-century poetry of Stefan George. Cf. George, "Nach der Lese," in *Das Jahr der Seele* [1897], *Sämtliche Werke in 18 Bänden*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), pp. 11–22.

[82] For a more recent reiteration of this nostalgic assessment of things in modernity, see Christoph Jamme, "The Loss of Things: Cézanne, Rilke, Heidegger," in *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art, and Technology*, ed. Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1994), pp. 139–53.

angelegt ist."[83] The "Dinggedicht," as he termed it, avoided the usual lyrical effect of dissolving represented objects into a personal expression of subjective experience. Instead, such poems sought to develop an objective and distanced description of the things themselves, and to preserve a sense of the objects' obdurate materiality: a "sachlicher Dauer" and "epische Starre der Dinge."[84] While the thingly and objective qualities of Oppert's *Dinggedicht* cannot be clearly related to the emergent Weimar aesthetics of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, both of these developments might be understood in relation to a similar historical impulse: a movement against the preceding, subjective and emotional excesses of German Expressionism and for a more detached and descriptive assessment of material realities.

In current Rilke scholarship, Oppert's *Dinggedicht* concept is often appropriated, however his exact definition of the term is disregarded, since it fails to identify the dynamic interplay of subjective and objective dimensions in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*.[85] Such criticism is certainly justified, yet it overlooks the exact historical positioning of Oppert's argument. While his article on the *Dinggedicht* may suffer as scholarship for its normative privileging of objective description in poetry—from which Rilke's actual

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[83] See Kurt Oppert, "Das Dinggedicht: Eine Kunstform bei Mörike, Meyer und Rilke," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 4 (1926): pp. 747–83, quoted here, pp. 747–48.

[84] Ibid., p. 748.

[85] See, for example, Lawrence Ryan, "*Neue Gedichte*—New Poems," in *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Erika A Metzger and Michael M. Metzger (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), pp. 128–53; and his "Rilke's *Dinggedichte*: The 'Thing' As 'Poem in Itself'," in *Rilke-Rezeptionen/Rilke Reconsidered*, ed. Sigrid Bauschinger and Susan L. Cocalis (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke, 1995), pp. 27–35. For a more systematic attempt at reading the interrelations between subjective and objective representations in the *Neue Gedichte*, see Judith Ryan, *Umschlag und Verwandlung*.

poems depart significantly—it also reveals much about the priorities in the poet's critical reception at the time. In particular, Oppert makes a strong cultural-historical connection between the development of a supposedly objective description of things in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* and an apparent need for, "Protest und Gegenzug wider die dingzerstörende Technik und Zivilisation der Umwelt."[86] Oppert attributes the same historical understanding to Rilke himself, arguing that the ninth of his *Duineser Elegien*, written mainly in 1922, amounts to the poet's retrospective insight into his earlier *Neue Gedichte*: the realization that his poems indeed sought to preserve those things that were increasingly threatened by modern technologies and civilization, and to give them lasting presence in the poetic word. Oppert quotes Rilke's Ninth Elegy approvingly ("Mehr als je / fallen die Dinge dahin, die erlebbaren, denn, / was sie verdrängend ersetzt, ist ein Tun ohne Bild")—interpreting "Tun ohne Bild" as "die bloße leere Betriebsamkeit" of modern life—and describes the program of the *Duineser Elegien* (of preserving and transforming inwardly, "diese von Hingang lebenden Dinge") as simply a later articulation of what was already occurring in the *Neue Gedichte* (*KA* II, 228–29).[87] And yet, such 1920s readings of the *Neue Gedichte* cannot be simply projections of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* program back onto an earlier period of literary production. Even before the *Duineser Elegien* were published in 1923, critics of the interwar period began reassessing the *Neue Gedichte* in terms of a preservation of natural and traditional objects against the destructive consequences of modernization. In a 1919 monograph on Rilke (cited in Oppert), Robert Faesi describes the *Neue Gedichte* as an encyclopedic storage

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[86] Oppert, "Das Dinggedicht," p. 781.

[87] Ibid., p. 781.

for all types of things, dead and living, natural and manmade, plant and animal, "wie in einem ungeheueren Arsenal."[88] The military connotation would have been even more resonant just after the end of World War I, suggesting an "arsenal" of more traditional objects in opposition to military technologies of mass destruction.

The interpretation of Rilke's poetry as a preservation or salvation of things, which emerged for the first time during the Weimar period, corresponds closely with the prevalent *Kulturpessimismus* of the time. As part of a fundamentally conservative critique of modernity, Rilke's poetological positions in the *Duineser Elegien* and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* might be understood to represent but a highly individualistic form of opposition to the alienating forces of modern *Zivilisation*, through a literary project of preserving aspects of a disappearing, traditional *Kultur* within a poetic realm of "Innerlichkeit."[89] As Rilke expresses it in the seventh of his *Duineser Elegien*, the responsibility of mankind is to preserve and transform inwardly ("es innen verwandeln") the remnants of a threatened past—"ein dauerndes Haus," or "ein einst gebetenes Ding," such as a temple, pillar, or statue—as part of poetic opposition to the growth of modern cities and abstract, technological constructions (*KA* II, 221–22). Even a generous reading would have to admit that Rilke's poetic program of internalizing the threatened, external realities of a pre-modern world was, at best, a highly personal and quietistic stance, one which tended

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[88] See Robert Faesi, *Rainer Maria Rilke* (Zürich: Amalthea-Verlag, 1919), here p. 24.

[89] On the conservative and regressive aspects of Rilke's *Dingbegriff* in the 1920s, see, for example, Egon Schwarz, *Das verschluckte Schluchzen: Poesie und Politik bei Rainer Maria Rilke* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1972), pp. 90–105; and Peter Demetz, "Weltinnenraum und Technologie," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 17/18 (Jan.–June 1966): pp. 4–11. For more recent attempts at making such conceptions productive for analyzing Rilke's understandings of sensory experience and aesthetic abstraction, see essays collected in *Poetik der Krise: Rilkes Rettung der Dinge in den "Weltinnenraum"*, ed. Hans Richard Brittnacher, et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000).

toward a regressive retreat from political and social realities. At worst, as Egon Schwarz has retrospectively shown, it merged easily with the anti-modern and nationalistic rhetoric of European fascism, whose Italian variety Rilke came to praise in private correspondences between 1921 and 1926.[90]

While the poetological position of the *Duineser Elegien* can be easily critiqued in this manner, the 1920s notion of a preservation of things is far more ambiguous in relation to the *Neue Gedichte*. As Benjamin's and Faesi's 1927 remarks suggest, Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* are significant not only for their poetic representations of material objects, but also for how they take on a particular, performative dimension, by staging for the individual reader an immediate experience of things, and by facilitating further a kind of collective readership that assembles in opposition to the damaging influences of capitalism and industrial technology. For Faesi, problematically, this takes the form of an elitist, anti-modernist, and quasi-religious community of sensitive readers, who join Rilke in devoting themselves to the disappearing objects of nature and culture.[91] For Benjamin, however, this finds expression in the tactile handling and interpersonal exchange of Rilke's poetry of things, bringing together a generation of readers conditioned by the subtle, sensory effects of the poems. In this sense, the 1920s reading of the *Neue*

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[90] See Schwarz, *Das verschluckte Schluchzen*.

[91] Faesi, *Orplid* 3 (April–May 1927): p. 19: "Und den Dingen gibt er [Rilke] sich hin: den Dingen der Landschaft und der kostbaren Gebilden der Kultur." Faesi continues on to imagine a cult-like community of readers in opposition to the culture of machines and capitalism: "Weit unter dem Dröhnen der Maschinen und dem Geschrei des Marktes verlaufen wie in Katakomben die geheimen, aber ungestörten Gänge zwischen diesem Dichter und der Gemeinde seiner Wahlverwandten. Hier auf dem Grunde seiner Einsamkeit und um ihren Preis allein erwächst eine zarte, fast religiöse Vereinigung des Empfindens und beginnt das Wort dieses Einzelnen, Abgesonderten, Geltung – für die Masse nicht – aber für viele Beste und Empfänglichste zu gewinnen" (p. 23).

Gedichte as a preservation of things need not be subsumed under the esoteric notions of the *Duineser Elegien*, as a poetic transformation of external objects into an invisible realm of interiority.[92] In assessing Rilke's readership at the time of his death, Benjamin and Faesi stress rather a social function of the *Neue Gedichte*: a collective entangling of human readers with an array of natural, aesthetic, and everyday things.

In what follows, I will argue that this social dimension was itself constitutive for Rilke's treatment of the "thing" (*Ding*) from the very beginning, and that it plays a major role in his anthropological grounding of art in terms of mimetic relations. Rilke's understanding of the thing can be observed to develop out of a complex set of issues, historically situated around 1900: the radical *Sprachskepsis* of the time, the experience of urban modernity, and developments in the modernist arts. It is not sufficient merely to investigate the supposed influence of these encounters on Rilke's literary writings. Far better is to observe how this emphatic notion of the *Ding* takes shape at the intersection of his poetological thinking, his reflections on the visual arts, and his anthropological understanding of historical relationships between humans and things. Framing the analysis with respect to Rilke's 1920s reception helps to emphasize the convergence of aesthetic, critical, and social dimensions in the poet's conception of the *Ding* as it emerges in relation to earlier historical crises in the understandings of language, sensory experience, and visual representation around 1900.

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[92] The most direct statement regarding Rilke's poetological project of transforming external, visible things into a state of invisible interiority can be found in the November 13, 1925 letter to Witold von Hulewicz (*B* II, 478–85). Also, cf. the ninth of the *Duineser Elegien*: "Und diese, von Hingang / lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich, / traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu. / Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen / verwandeln / in – o unendlich – in uns!" (*KA* II, 229).

A Kinship of Things

As with other critical receptions of Rilke in the 1920s, Robert Musil's commemorative address bases a defense of the poet's work largely on the intimacy and familiarity it facilitates among humans and things. Musil elaborates, in particular, on Rilke's sophisticated use of metaphor (*Gleichnis*) to achieve a dynamic interweaving of humans and things, amounting to not only an aesthetic effect, but also a transformative vision of the human with respect to its myriad interrelations with the nonhuman world. As he explains it toward the end of the speech, Rilke's most important poetic achievement might be best understood as a novel inversion of the longstanding, poetic tradition of personification and anthropomorphism:

> Bei Rilke werden nicht die Steine oder Bäume zu Menschen – wie sie es immer and überall getan haben, wo Gedichte gemacht wurden –, sondern auch die Menschen werden zu Dingen oder namenlosen Wesen und gewinnen damit erst ihre letzte, von einem ebenso namenlosen Hauch bewegte Menschlichkeit.[93]

In Musil's account, Rilke's poetic representations of humans and things amount to a strangely reciprocal animation. Not only are things animated in the likeness of humans, but humans too are animated with a new "breath" (*Hauch*) of life in their likeness to things. In contrast to more traditional Western notions of the artist as creator, who breathes life into inanimate things, Musil evokes a world of animistic magic, whereby humans are transformed through their mimetic resemblance and contact with things.

That humans and nonhumans can become each other's likenesses in Rilke's poetry corresponds, for Musil, to a particular "feeling about life" (*Lebensgefühl*) in which persons and things are seen not as distinct and opposing categories but rather in terms of

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[93] Musil, "Rede zur Rilke-Feier," p. 1237.

their fluid interactions and interrelations.[94] As Musil suggests, this sense of a metaphoric likeness between humans and things in Rilke is not merely the product of poetic technique; it also forms the anthropological basis of the poet's understanding of art and life. In a long 1900 poem, "Fragmente aus verlorenen Tagen," republished in the 1902 edition of *Buch der Bilder*, Rilke provides a striking account of the power of mimetic resemblances. Comparing momentary, daily experiences to various thingly entities—over a long list of similes ("Wie Vögel, [...] wie Gassen, [...] wie Trunkene [...] wie volle Rosen [...]")—Rilke concludes the poem:

> Und mancher Tage Stunden waren *so*.
> Als formte wer mein Abbild irgendwo,
> um es mit Nadeln langsam zu mißhandeln.
> Ich spürte jede Spitze seiner Spiele,
> und war, als ob ein Regen auf mich fiele,
> in welchem alle Dinge sich verwandeln. (*KA* I, 321–22)

Relating poetic metaphor to the magical technique of injuring or destroying the image of an enemy, Rilke's poem attributes a mimetic power to objects comparable to late nineteenth-century anthropological accounts of "imitative magic."[95] In Rilke's poetry up to around 1900, he would still attempt to evoke and illustrate this type of magical interrelationship with things in the first-version voice. After about 1902, however, he recognized the necessity of artificially staging and performing such mimetic relations, by addressing the reader directly in second person (as in the poem "Die Rosenschale," discussed above). The motivations and representational strategies informing this shift will be investigated in detail in what follows.

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[94] Ibid., p. 1238–39.

[95] For the classic account of "imitative" or "homeopathic" magic, beginning with a discussion of this very technique, see James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* [1890ff.], abridged 1922 ed. (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 15–45.

The close connection between anthropology and aesthetics is evident throughout Rilke's letters and essays, and takes shape most strongly through his reflections on things. In his early writings, Rilke discusses art and the artist not in opposition to life, but as a privileged "Lebensform" that entails a particular attitude and quasi-animistic relationship to the world of things. As he explains it in "Moderne Lyrik," a lecture from 1898:

> Kunst erscheint mir als das Bestreben eines Einzelnen, über das Enge und Dunkle hin, eine Verständigung zu finden mit allen Dingen, mit den kleinsten, wie mit den größten, und in solchen beständigen Zwiegesprächen näher zu kommen zu den letzten leisen Quellen alles Lebens. [...] So sehen Sie also, daß Künstler nichtnur [*sic*] kein Ausgeschalteter des Lebens ist, sondern, daß vielmehr die Kunst sich darstellt als eine bewegtere – ich möchte sagen unbescheidenere Lebensform, indem der Schaffende auch an die schweigsamsten Dinge mit seinen flehenden Fragen herantritt und, mit keiner Antwort zufrieden, immer weiter muß. (*KA* IV, 65)

In Rilke's description, the artist's closeness to the world of things bears a strong resemblance to the behavior of children, who might likewise attempt dialog with inanimate objects. As Rilke explains further in "Über Kunst" (1898), art as a "way of being" (*Art zu sein*) or "perceiving" (*Lebensanschauung*) also involves a release from personal intent and control, and a denial of the value and ownership of objects, which bespeaks the childlike as well:

> [D]iese Art zu sein hat etwas Naives und Unwillkürliches und ähnelt jener Zeit des Unbewussten an, deren bestes Merkmal ein freudiges Vertrauen ist: der Kindheit. [...] Kein Ding ist wichtiger als ein anderes in den Händen des Kindes. Es spielt mit einer goldenen Brosche oder mit einer weißen Wiesenblume. Es wird in der Ermüdung beide gleich achtlos fallen lassen und vergessen, wie beide ihm gleich glänzend schienen in dem Lichte seiner Freude. Es hat nicht die Angst des Verlustes. Die Welt ist ihm noch die schöne Schale, darin nichts verloren geht" (*KA* IV, 116).

A similar mode of disinterested, precategorical perception reappears in Rilke's writings on Rodin and Cézanne between 1902 and 1907, and can be productively compared to the

poet's project of "learning to see" (*sehen lernen*) as articulated in the *Malte* novel and contemporaneous letters. What these earlier texts underscore, however, is that this manner of apprehending things is not merely a matter of aesthetic training. It also involves a particular anthropological conception of the artist, whose aesthetic production and perception comes close to the child's relationship to things.[96]

More so than Cézanne, Rodin is the artist that for Rilke best represents the integration of art and life under the *Lebensform* of the artist. As I will argue in the next section of the chapter, Rilke's Paris writings on Rodin go about fashioning the sculptor as the paragon of the modern artist, who remains centered on artistic production and impervious to the distractions and violent intrusions of modern urban life. For Rilke, Rodin's way of being, as a craftsman or "Handwerker," involves a mimetic closeness to the world of things that permits him a centeredness and resistance to the overwhelming sights, sounds, speeds, and sicknesses of the city. Rodin's reserve of humanity (as Musil would later suggest for Rilke as well) lies in his closeness to things, his ability to perceive humans as things, and to become even thing-like himself. As Rilke describes it in a 1903 letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, "ganz offen ist [Rodin] wenn er bei Dingen ist, oder wo Thiere und Menschen ihn still und wie Dinge berühren. […] Da es ihm gegeben ward, Dinge zu sehen in allem, erwarb er die Möglichkeit: Dinge zu bauen; denn dieses ist seine große Kunst" (*Bw* 92–93). Rodin's disinterested yet intimate apprehension of things, which Rilke elsewhere relates to the child, thus enables him to produce things of his own that instantiate a similar encounter for the viewer of the work. With this

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[96] A related statement can be found in Rilke's 1903 monograph on the Worpswede landscape painters: "Sie wollen das Beste erreichen und sie sind Kinder geworden. Sie sehen alles in einem Atem, Menschen und Dinge" (*KA* IV, 324).

production of sculptural things, as Rilke argues in yet another 1903 letter to Andreas-Salomé, Rodin also succeeds in generating a solid material reality that exists in opposition to the restlessness of modern life:

> er [hat] Dinge gemacht und hat sie um sich gestellt, Dinge und Dinge; so wuchs um ihn eine Wirklichkeit, eine weite stille Verwandtschaft von Dingen, die ihn mit anderen und älteren Dingen verband, bis er selbst aus einer Dynastie großer Dinge zu stammen schien: seine Ruhe und seine Geduld kommt von daher, sein angstloses, dauerndes Alter, seine Überlegenheit über die Menschen, die viel zu beweglich sind, zu schwankend, zu sehr spielend mit den Gleichgewichten, in denen er, fast unbewußt, ruht. (*Bw* 102–3)

Rilke's important articulation here, of a "kinship of things" (*eine Verwandtschaft von Dingen*), allows him to link Rodin and his work to a diverse array of aesthetic objects of both present and past. Through the metaphor of familial relations, Rilke brings together synchronic and diachronic temporalities in the interrelations of things: the artist produces a "kinship of things" through his body of work in the present; in addition, he and his work also bear a familial resemblance to a whole "dynasty" of much earlier works. The source of this kinship, as I will show, lies in the anthropological connection that Rilke makes between phylo- and ontogenetic stages of human development. The modern artist's ability to see "things" (*Dinge*) in humans and nonhumans alike, along with the artist's own kinship with the world of things (both of which Rilke relates to the child) exhibit a further connection to the relations to objects found in the earliest periods of human history. In preserving the child's relationship with things as a particular *Lebensform*, the modern artist thus also approximates a more primordial interrelation between humans and nonhumans, and gives these relations a lasting, material form in the production of art-objects. In this manner, Rilke's anthropological grounding of the artist and artistic production enables him to bridge vast historical distances and to attempt a

resuscitation of a mimetic kinship between humans and things through aesthetic production in his present day.

In his 1905/06 lecture on Rodin, Rilke rearticulates this anthropological conception of art, but shifts attention from production to the *reception* of art-works. In what amounts to a complete reorientation in the approach to Rodin's art, Rilke conveys to his audience an encounter with the sculptor's works as akin to a return to the child's animistic interactions with inanimate objects. Withholding Rodin's name for the entire introduction of his talk, Rilke avoids the usual questions of aesthetics and beauty, and evokes instead the child's relationship and attachment to things:

> Wenn es Ihnen möglich ist, kehren Sie mit einem Teile Ihres entwöhnten und erwachsenen Gefühls zu irgend einem Ihrer Kinder-Dinge zurück, mit dem Sie viel umgingen. Gedenken Sie, ob es irgend etwas gab, was Ihnen näher, vertrauter und nötiger war, als so ein Ding. Ob nicht alles – außer ihm – imstande war, Ihnen weh oder unrecht zu tun, Sie mit einem Schmerz zu erschrecken oder mit einer Ungewißheit zu verwirren? Wenn Güte unter Ihren ersten Erfahrungen war und Zutraun und Nichtalleinsein – verdanken Sie es nicht ihm? War es nicht ein Ding, mit dem Sie zuerst Ihr kleines Herz geteilt haben wie ein Stück Brot, das reichen mußte für zwei? [...] Dieser kleine vergessene Gegenstand, der alles zu bedeuten bereit war, machte Sie mit Tausendem vertraut, indem er tausend Rollen spielte, Tier war und Baum und König und Kind, – und als er zurücktrat, war das alles da. Dieses Etwas, so wertlos es war, hat Ihre Beziehungen zur Welt vorbereitet [...]. (*KA* IV, 455)

By appealing to his audience's memories of childhood, Rilke attempts to uncover from an earlier ontogenetic stage of development a common, animistic relationship with things—comprised of both an early, psychological identification with a particular object and the child's capacity for mimetic play. Rilke acknowledges these childhood relations to things as part of a primary, developmental stage that is eventually surpassed. To the audience of his Rodin lecture, however, he also asserts that a similar relationship might be recaptured in their own experience of art-objects. The childlike relationship with things that Rilke associates with the *Lebensform* of the artist can be had by others as well, he suggests: in

this case, through the viewer's experience of Rodin's sculptural works.[97]

As Rilke describes it near the beginning of the lecture, this childlike relationship with things also bears a deeper connection to a more primordial state of human existence:

> Mir ist zu Mute wie einem, der Sie an Ihre Kindheit erinnern soll. Nein, nicht nur an Ihre: an alles, was je Kindheit war. Denn es gilt, Erinnerungen in Ihnen aufzuwecken, die nicht die Ihren sind, die älter sind als Sie; Beziehungen sind wiederherzustellen und Zusammenhänge zu erneuern, die weit vor Ihnen liegen. (*KA* IV, 454)

For Rilke, the child's identification and mimetic play with things corresponds with the early history of human relations to things in a phylogenetic sense. In response to his main questions in the lecture—"Wodurch sind überhaupt Dinge mit uns verwandt? Welches ist ihre Geschichte?" (*KA* IV, 456)—Rilke offers an anthropological fiction to account for a primordial kinship between humans and things:

> Sehr frühe schon hat man Dinge geformt, mühsam, nach dem Vorbild der vorgefundenen natürlichen Dinge; man hat Werkzeuge gemacht und Gefäße, und es muß eine seltsame Erfahrung gewesen sein, Selbstgemachtes so anerkannt zu sehen, so gleichberechtigt, so wirklich neben dem, was *war*. Da entstand etwas, blindlings, in wilder Arbeit und trug an sich die Spuren eines bedrohten offenen Lebens, war noch warm davon, – aber kaum war es fertig und fortgestellt, so ging es schon ein unter die Dinge, nahm ihre Gelassenheit an, ihre stille Würde und sah nur noch wie entrückt mit wehmütigem Einverstehen aus seinem Dauern herüber. Dieses Erlebnis war so merkwürdig und so stark, daß man begreift, wenn es auf einmal Dinge gab, die nur um seinetwillen gemacht waren. Denn vielleicht waren die frühesten Götterbilder Anwendungen dieser Erfahrung, Versuche, aus Menschlichem und Tierischem, das man sah, ein Nicht-Mitsterbendes zu formen, ein Dauerndes, ein Nächsthöheres: ein Ding. (*KA* IV, 456)

The mimetic kinship with things that Rilke claims for the child and the artist is thus given

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[97] For more on the complex rhetorical and didactic strategies of Rilke's lectures, see Torsten Hoffmann, "Rilke als Redner: Publikumskommunikation und Kunstvermittlung in den Vorträgen 'Moderne Lyrik' (1898) and 'Vom Werke Auguste Rodins' (1905/1907)," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 20.3 (2010): pp. 543–62. As Hoffmann correctly notes: "Das Hauptanliegen seines Vortrags besteht weniger in der Information über Rodin als vielmehr in der Vermittlung einer ästhetisch-anthropologischen Grundhaltung, die Rodin beispielhaft verkörpert und die Rilke zur Orientierung und Nachahmung empfiehlt" (p. 544).

a speculative origin in the early production of man-made objects. In Rilke's account, the human's mimetic capacity for producing imitative representations of nature is quickly set aside, and replaced by a more intense fascination with the mimetic correspondences between human and thing. The uncanny experience—that man-made things can bear the warmth and traces of their human makers, and, at the same time, mark an absolute distance and indifference to their mortal lives—becomes, for Rilke, the originary impulse behind the production of tools, idols, and artworks. By first appealing to the child's interactions with objects, Rilke attempts to situate for his audience a reception of Rodin's sculpture not in terms of aesthetic mimesis, that is, as imitative representations of external nature, but rather in terms of their relational kinship with humans and other objects. By grounding this mimetic relationship in the above anthropological fiction, Rilke adds a temporal, historical dimension to this "kinship of things," providing a phylogenetic account of its emergence, and positioning the man-made thing as the immortal bearer of mimetic correspondences (*ein ähnliches Ding*). Thus for Rilke, Rodin's ability to produce art-objects, in tune with a childlike experience of things, links him and his work to a more primordial kinship among humans and things, which originates in the earliest human, artistic production.

In writings related to his work on the "mimetic faculty," Walter Benjamin would likewise employ the metaphor of kinship in his historical descriptions of mimetic correspondences among humans and things. As with Rilke, Benjamin's account suggests that these similarities are not merely the subjective fantasies of individuals, but rather can also have a wider, objective meaning for a given culture. As Blair Ogden has recently worked out, Benjamin's appeal to family resemblances in writings preliminary to "Über

das mimetische Vermögen" helps to articulate two central aspects of his theory of mimesis: (1) that mimetic similarities can straddle the boundary between nature and culture; and (2) that these similarities occur in time in both a diachronic and synchronic fashion.[98] Benjamin writes:

> Der Ansatz sieht so aus: Man geht von der »Ähnlichkeit« aus. Man sucht sich klar zu machen, daß was wir von Ähnlichkeiten wahrnehmen können, etwa in den Gesichtern untereinander, in Architekturen und Pflanzenformen, in gewissen Wolkenformen und Hautausschlägen, nur winzige Teilansichten aus einem Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit sind. Man geht weiter und sucht sich klar zu machen, daß diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht nur durch zufällige Vergleiche unsererseits in die Dinge hineintragen werden, sondern daß sie alle – *wie die Ähnlichkeit zwischen Eltern und Kindern* – Auswirkungen einer eigens in ihnen wirkenden, einer mimetischen Kraft sind. Und ferner: daß die Gegenstände nicht nur, die Objekte, dieser mimetischen Kraft ohne Zahl sind, sondern daß dies gleicherweise von den Subjekten, von den mimetischen Zentren gilt, deren jedes Wesen eine Mehrzahl besitzen könnte. Zu alledem hat man zu bedenken, daß weder die mimetischen Zentren noch die mimetischen Gegenstände, ihre Objekte, im Zeitlauf unveränderlich die gleichen geblieben sein könnten, daß im Lauf der Jahrhunderte wie die mimetische Kraft so auch die mimetische Anschauungsweise aus gewissen Feldern, vielleicht um sich in andere zu ergießen, geschwunden sein könnte.[99]

As with family resemblances, which depend on both genetic inheritance and socially learned behavior, Benjamin assesses a whole "Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit" that arises not only out of the biological reproduction of similarities (as in people's faces and plant forms), but also through modes of mimetic perception that are culturally learned and which draw non-arbitrary connections among a whole array of natural and cultural objects (including buildings, cloud formations, and skin diseases, along with plants and humans). And as with family resemblances, these mimetic similarities can manifest

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[98] See Blair Ogden, "Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Philosophical Anthropology: A Reevaluation of the Mimetic Faculty," *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): pp. 57–73, here, pp. 61–62.

[99] Walter Benjamin, "Zur Astrologie" [1932], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 192–93 (my emphasis). Benjamin likely took down this fragment in 1932, as preliminary to his 1933 texts, "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," and "Über das mimetische Vermögen."

themselves both synchronically, at a given historical moment, and diachronically, as subject to change over longer historical periods.

Benjamin's later texts, "Lehre vom Ähnlichen," and "Über das mimetische Vermögen," make clear the impossibility of a significant remainder in the present of any "Kosmos der Ähnlichkeit" from earlier world-views. In modernity, as Benjamin explains, there can be found only the most minimal residues of the magical correspondences rooted in earlier sensuous similarities among humans and things. Building on his earlier philosophy of language, Benjamin acknowledges that our powers of mimetic recognition and behavior have been purged of their earlier magical form and relocated into the system of writing and language, as "das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit."[100] While Rilke and Benjamin share similar understandings of mimesis as a primary human tendency (still evident in ontogenetic development), they differ significantly on the possibilities of sensuous, mimetic correspondences within modernity. Benjamin's "mimetic faculty" quickly slips over into a theory of non-sensuous similarity in language. Rilke, by contrast, imagines the possibility of mimetic correspondences rooted in sensuous similarity. With the onset of modernity, however, Rilke imagines an historical transformation in the mimetic relations between humans and things, in which a pathological form of mimesis develops as the underside of a more positive kinship with things. The production and reception of art-objects, as Rilke maintains, offers one possibility for resuscitating a mimetic closeness with things, which resists the damaging consequences of modernity. At the same time, however, Rilke's deliberate strategies of

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[100] See Walter Benjamin, "Über das mimetische Vermögen" [1933], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1, pp. 210–13, here p. 213.

rhetorically staging animistic encounters with art-objects in the Rodin lectures and performing the mimetic power of things in the *Neue Gedichte* suggest his implicit knowledge that such relations were already lost in modern life and instead had to be artificially produced through poetic means.

While the interplay of aesthetics and anthropology is a constant in Rilke's consideration of things, this more historical notion of a "kinship of things" emerges only gradually in his writing. In early works before 1900, Rilke's notion of a kinship between humans and things remained couched in religious, monistic terms. In "Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben"(1899) from *Das Stunden-Buch*, Rilke's speaker intends to find oneness with God by joining the order of things, by becoming like their "brother" (*Bruder*): "Ich bin auf der Welt zu gering und doch nicht klein genug, / um vor dir zu sein wie ein Ding, / dunkel und klug," and later proclaims to God, "Ich finde dich in allen diesen Dingen, / denen ich gut und wie ein Bruder bin" (*KA* I, 162–63, 168). Elsewhere in *Das Stunden-Buch*, as well as in other contemporaneous poems, Rilke resorts to romantic tropes of musical resonance and song in order to imagine an ideal mergence and communication with things.[101] In a famous poem from the early collection *Mir zur Feier* (1899), Rilke situates the ideal language of a "singing of things" in relation to the prominent *Sprachskepsis* of the time:

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[101] See, for example, "Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft" (1901): "es ist ein großes Wunder in der Welt: / ich fühle: *alles Leben wird gelebt*. / Wer lebt es denn? Sind das die Dinge, die / wie eine ungespielte Melodie / im Abend wie in einer Harfe stehn?" (*KA* I, 211); and "Am Rande der Nacht" (1900) in *Das Buch der Bilder*: "Meine Stube und diese Weite, / wach über nachtendem Land, – / ist Eines. Ich bin eine Saite, / über rauschende breite / Resonanzen gespannt. / Die Dinge sind Geigenleiber, / von murrendem Dunkel voll; / […] / Ich soll / silbern erzittern: dann wird / Alles unter mir leben, / und was in den Dingen irrt, / wird nach dem Lichte streben" (*KA* I, 283); see as well the description of a "gemeinsame Melodie" between human and thing in the 1898 text, "Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge" (*KA* IV, 106).

> Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.
> Sie sprechen alles so deutlich aus:
> Und dieses heißt Hund und jenes heißt Haus,
> und hier ist Beginn und das Ende ist dort.
> […]
> Ich will immer warnen und wehren: Bleibt fern.
> Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern.
> Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm.
> Ihr bringt mir alle die Dinge um. (*KA* I, 106)[102]

In general, Rilke's early poetics of things belongs to a monistic or pantheistic world-view, in which the lives of man, nature, and things are connected under a single unifying principle. The oneness of inner and outer, subject and object, person and thing, originates in the anthropomorphic projection of inner emotions out onto the nonhuman world. Explaining the role of the artist in his 1898 lecture "Moderne Lyrik," Rilke writes: "Die Geheimnisse der Dinge verschmelzen in seinem Innern mit seinen eigenen tiefsten Empfindungen und werden ihm, so als ob es eigene Sehnsüchte wären, laut"(*KA* IV, 65). According to Rilke's early aesthetics—as articulated in "Moderne Lyrik" and elsewhere––the representation of nonhuman things becomes thus the outer appearance or pretense (*Vorwand*) for the expression of an inner emotional state (*Geständnis*). Things present themselves only in order to become one with the artist's subjective expression:

> Die Kunst ist der dunkle Wunsch aller Dinge. Sie wollen alle Bilder unserer Geheimnisse sein. […] Das ist das Rufen, das der Künstler vernimmt: der Wunsch der Dinge, seine Sprache zu sein. Er soll sie aus den schweren unsinnigen Beziehungen der Konvention in die großen Zusammenhänge seines Wesens heben. (*KA* IV, 91–92)

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[102] On the connection between *Sprachskepsis* around 1900 and an idealized "language of things," cf. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief" [1902], in *Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden*, vol. 7, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), pp. 461–72. While Rilke's 1899 poem gives a similar voice to a crisis of language, the alternative it offers bears far more a regressive resemblance to the Romantic language or "singing" of things found in Eichendorff's "Wünschelrute" (1835), for example.

During this early period of Rilke's writing, the closeness between humans and things occurs through the dissolving of the external object into an interior subjectivity. Here, the mechanism of animating the thing, i.e. the anthropomorphizing projection of the human subject, most resembles the *Einfühlungsästhetik* of the late nineteenth century.[103]

As Torsten Hoffmann has helpfully summarized, Rilke departs from his earlier monistic and pantheistic views upon his first serious engagement with the visual arts after 1900.[104] Through his study of the Worpswede landscape painters, Rilke grew to replace his earlier, aesthetic notions of a pan-subjective oneness with the world with a view of the radical foreignness and sublime indifference of nature in relation to man. During his off and on stay at the artist colony near the north German area of Worpswede between 1900 and 1902, Rilke developed a familiarity with the contemporary work of various, regional landscape painters, such as Fritz Overbeck, Otto Modersohn, and Heinrich Vogeler, as well as the surrounding environment and peasant milieu that were their subject-matter. In his 1903 *Worpswede* monograph, as well as in an important preliminary sketch from 1902, "Von der Landschaft," Rilke builds on these experiences to develop a speculative history of landscape painting, which also considers the changing historical relationship between humans and things. In "Von der Landschaft," Rilke describes how the representation of landscape changes historically from an indifferent backdrop for the

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[103] See, for example, Robert Vischer's account of an empathetic "Verschmelzung von Subjekt und Objekt" and "der pantheistische Drang zur Vereinigung mit der Welt" in his *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik* (Leipzig: H. Credner, 1873), quoted here, p. 28; and the aesthetic theory of empathy in Theodor Lipps, *Ästhetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, 2 vols. (Hamburg and Leipzig: Voss, 1903–1906).

[104] See his "Nachwort" to Rainer Maria Rilke, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, ed. Torsten Hoffmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2009), pp. 249–54.

human body in the arts of antiquity to the abstract regions of heaven, hell, and earth in Medieval painting, and from the emotionally expressive landscapes of the Renaissance to modern landscape painting that sees nature, "als ein Fernes und Fremdes, als ein Entlegenes und Liebloses, das sich ganz in sich vollzieht" (*KA* IV, 208–13, here 211). In the background landscape of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Rilke identifies the historical shift from a representational aesthetics that understands landscape to be a pretense (*Vorwand*) for the confession of human emotion (*Geständnis*), to a representation of nature in landscape as, "das Andere, das Teilnahmslose," as sublimely indifferent to the lives of humans (*KA* IV, 210–12). Through his speculative history of landscape painting, Rilke thus at once relegates his previous aesthetics of *Vorwand und Geständnis* to an earlier historical period and claims for the present an increasing alienation between man and nature.

In Rilke's account, this history of pictorial representation corresponds closely with the actual historical relations between humans and things. The disappearance of an aesthetics of empathy and subjective projection in contemporary landscape painting suggests, for Rilke, an historical recognition of the radical distancing and estrangement between man and nature in the present—a mutual drawing apart and reification of human and nonhuman alike. He writes in "Von der Landschaft":

> In diesem Aufwachsen der Landschafts-Kunst zu einem langsamen Landschaft-Werden der Welt liegt eine weite menschliche Entwicklung. Der Inhalt dieser Bilder, der so absichtslos aus Schauen und Arbeit entsprang, spricht uns davon, daß eine Zukunft begonnen hat mitten in unserer Zeit: daß der Mensch nichtmehr der Gesellige ist, der unter seinesgleichen im Gleichgewicht geht, und auch derjenige nichtmehr, um dessentwillen Abend und Morgen wird und Nähe und Ferne. Daß er unter die Dinge gestellt ist wie ein Ding, unendlich allein und daß alle Gemeinschaft aus Dingen und Menschen sich zurückgezogen hat in die gemeinsame Tiefe, aus der die Wurzeln alles Wachsenden trinken. (*KA* IV, 212–13)

As Rilke explains in the *Worpswede* monograph, the representation of humans as thing-like in contemporary landscape painting is not, however, the reflection of an altogether negative situation. It marks as well a challenge to an anthropocentric and instrumental view of nature, by placing man on the order of things according to a much larger scale of historical relations:

> Es scheint immer wieder, daß die Natur nichts davon weiß, daß wir sie bebauen und uns eines kleinen Teils ihrer Kräfte ängstlich bedienen. Wir steigern in manchen Teilen ihre Fruchtbarkeit und ersticken an anderen Stellen mit dem Pflaster unserer Städte wundervolle Frühlinge, die bereit waren, aus den Krumen zu steigen. Wir führen die Flüsse zu unseren Fabriken hin, aber sie wissen nicht von den Maschinen, die sie treiben. Wir spielen mit dunklen Kräften, die wir mit unseren Namen nicht erfassen können, wie Kinder mit dem Feuer spielen, und es scheint einen Augenblick, als hätte alle Energie bisher ungebraucht in den Dingen gelegen, bis wir kamen, um sie auf unser flüchtiges Leben und seine Bedürfnisse anzuwenden. Aber immer und immer wieder in Jahrtausenden schütteln die Kräfte ihre Namen ab und erheben sich, wie ein unterdrückter Stand, gegen ihre kleinen Herren, ja nicht einmal *gegen* sie, – sie stehen einfach auf, und die Kulturen fallen von den Schultern der Erde, die wieder groß ist und weit und allein mit ihren Meeren, Bäumen und Sternen. [...] Der Mensch verlor seine Wichtigkeit, er trat zurück vor den großen, einfachen, unerbittlichen Dingen, die ihn überragten und überdauerten. Man mußte deshalb nicht darauf verzichten, ihn darzustellen, im Gegenteil: durch die gewissenhafte und gründliche Beschäftigung mit der Natur hatte man gelernt, ihn besser und gerechter zu sehen. Er war kleiner geworden: nichtmehr der Mittelpunkt der Welt; er war größer geworden: denn man schaute ihn mit denselben Augen an wie die Natur, er galt nicht mehr als ein Baum, aber er galt viel, weil der Baum viel galt. (*KA* IV, 309–13)

That man could no longer see himself to be reflected in what seemed an increasingly alien and indifferent nature, or be depicted as such in the visual arts, was thus, for Rilke, not only a narrative of historical loss, but also an uncovering of a deeper, ahistorical commonality among humans and things as discrete elements of the natural world.

Through Rilke's study of the Worpswede painters and his observations of the north German peasants of the coastal plains, he developed an understanding of a deeper commonality between humans and things in terms of the unconscious mimicry and mimetic resemblances that had arisen over long periods of human association with a

natural environment. In the case of the north German peasants, they appear shaped by their strenuous labors on the coastal plains:

> Alle haben nur *ein* Gesicht: das harte, gespannte Gesicht der Arbeit, [...] Man sieht Arme, die das Heben schwerer Dinge übermäßig verlängert hat und Rücken von Frauen und Greisen, die krumm geworden sind wie Bäume, die immer in demselben Sturm gestanden haben. [...] Im Frühling, wenn das Torfmachen beginnt, erheben sie sich mit dem Hellwerden und bringen den ganzen Tag, von Nässe triefend, durch das Mimikry ihrer schwarzen, schlammigen Kleidung dem Moore angepaßt, in der Torfgrube zu, aus der sie die bleischwere Moorerde emporschaufeln. (*KA* IV, 321–23)

Rilke repeats a similar claim in an August 12, 1904 letter collected posthumously in the popular *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*: "Wir sind ins Leben gesetzt, als in das Element, dem wir am meisten entsprechen, und wir sind überdies durch jahrtausendelange Anpassung diesem Leben so ähnlich geworden, daß wir, wenn wir stille halten, durch ein glückliches Mimikry von allem, was uns umgibt, kaum zu unterscheiden sind."[105]

As Rilke indicates slightly earlier in the *Worpswede* book, this positive mimetic resemblance to the natural surroundings is, by contrast, entirely missing for the residents of the modern city:

> Ähnlich wie die Sprache nichts mehr mit den Dingen gemein hat, welche sie nennt, so haben die Gebärden der meisten Menschen, die in den Städten leben, ihre Beziehung zur Erde verloren, sie hängen gleichsam in der Luft, schwanken hin und her und finden keinen Ort, wo sie sich niederlassen könnten. (*KA* IV, 315)

Combining the rhetoric of the turn-of-the-century *Sprachkrise* with a nostalgic critique of urban life, Rilke recognizes the strong, modern separations between word and thing, man and nature. That the hard lives of north German peasants could bring about a positive, mimetic resemblance with nature was but a peripheral and atavistic occurrence in the new age of the modern metropolis and could only be evoked as a regressive fantasy.

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[105] Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (Leipzig: Insel, 1929), p. 45.

Instead, Rilke imagines the inherent mimetic behavior of humans to be dangerously rearticulated within the modern city. In contrast to the tough mimetic adaptation to nature of the north German peasants, Rilke describes the city-dweller's self-destructive struggle to adapt to the modern technological environment, crowds, and shocks of the city. Describing the people of Paris in a July 18, 1903 letter, Rilke writes:

> sie waren Vorübergehende unter Vorübergehenden, alleingelassen und ungestört in ihrem Schicksal. Man fing sie höchstens als Eindruck auf und betrachtete sie mit ruhiger sachlicher Neugier wie eine neue Art Thier, dem die Noth besondere Organe ausgebildet hat, Hunger- und Sterbeorgane. Und sie trugen *das trostlose, mißfarbene Mimicry der übergroßen Städte* und hielten aus unter dem Fuß jedes Tages der sie trat wie zähe Käfer, dauerten, als ob sie noch auf etwas warten müssten, zuckten wie Stücke eines zerhauenen großen Fisches, der schon fault aber immer noch lebt. [...] O was ist das für eine Welt. Stücke, Stücke von Menschen, Theile von Thieren, Überreste von gewesenen Dingen und alles noch bewegt, wie in einem unheimlichen Winde durcheinandertreibend, getragen und tragend, fallend und sich überholend im Fall. (*Bw* 67, my emphasis)

For Rilke, the human tendency toward mimetic behavior and perception is not altogether lost under modern social and experiential conditions; rather, it reappears in pathological and grotesque forms that mimic the dehumanizing turmoil and fragmentation of the modern city. Like Roger Caillois's later account of mimicry as the "mimetic assimilation of animate beings into the inanimate realm," Rilke's comparison with animals and insects underscores the ambivalence of the drive to imitate one's surroundings, which can easily slip from a strategy of survival to a means of self-destruction.[106]

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[106] Cf. Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" [1935], in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Naish (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003), pp. 91–103, quoted here, p. 102. Throughout the article, Caillois discusses insects whose adaptive mimicry appears to make them more susceptible to prey and death. Rilke reuses his image of the squashed beetle in a similar manner in his 1910 *Malte* novel: "Wie ein Käfer, auf den man tritt, so quillst du aus dir hinaus, und dein bißchen obere Härte und Anpassung ist ohne Sinn" (*KA* III, 507).

Rodin and the City

In response to his fearful fantasies of self-destructive mimesis and mimicry in the modern city, Rilke, after 1902, approached his own poetic production and the sculpture of Rodin as artificial, aesthetic strategies for instantiating a controlled and more positive kinship with things. Through his firsthand study of Rodin's sculptural practice and artworks (which he began in Paris in 1902), Rilke develops the fullest articulation of his anthropological conception of the artist as a maker of things and art-making as a resuscitation of a positive mimetic kinship between humans and things. Before presenting related, close readings of Rilke's "thing-poems" in the final section of the chapter, the present section will trace out the development of Rilke's creative fashioning of Rodin's life and work in explicit contrast to the urban traumas that the poet experienced during his time in Paris.

At the end of August 1902, Rilke left the small north German town of Westerwede, where he shared a home with his wife Clara and their young daughter, and relocated for his first extended stay in the city of Paris. Earlier that year, he had secured a book deal to produce a study of Auguste Rodin for art historian Richard Muther's series of illustrated monographs, *Die Kunst*, and therefore required first-hand experience of Rodin's working methods and his large body of sculptural work. During his first months in Paris, Rilke enjoyed a friendly acquaintanceship with the older artist, observed his daily sculptural practice, studio spaces, and everyday life, and was able to rapidly compose the text for his monograph between mid November and mid December of 1902. The book publication appeared in March of 1903, with an unchanged second edition in 1904. An expanded third edition followed in 1907, which included a version of Rilke's

later lecture on Rodin that he wrote in October 1905 and delivered in Prague and various German cities between late 1905 and March of 1906. As is well known, Rilke's concentrated study of Rodin during this period not only resulted in a highly original reassessment of the sculptor's work, but also had a profound impact on Rilke's understanding of his own literary production. Most famously, Rilke's related conceptions of the *Ding* and *Kunst-Ding*—which gained a new emphasis in relation to Rodin's sculptural practice—would come to inform much of the poetic work in his two-part collection of the *Neue Gedichte* and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, published in 1907 and 1908, respectively. Rilke's well-known, yet obscure intention to produce "written things" (*geschriebene Dinge*) in analogue to the "plastic things" (*plastische Dinge*) of Rodin, continues to motivate many interpretations of these poetic works (*Bw* 105).

As is also well known, Rilke's first stay in Paris was important not just in terms of his highly productive encounter with the art and person of Rodin; it also marked the beginning of the poet's traumatized responses to the modern metropolis, triggered by its human crowds, illnesses, and crime, as well as the shocks, noises, and excessive stimuli of the urban environment itself. Traces of Rilke's ill ease in the city can be found throughout his correspondences from this period. And in his 1910 novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*—a work that bears strong biographical correspondences to Rilke's repeated stays in Paris, and, which has become a central literary account for the experience of urban modernity—the fragmentary narrative opens with a date and location corresponding to Rilke's very first residence in the city: "11. September, rue Toullier" (*KA* III, 455).[107] During Rilke's early stay in Paris, the

traumatic shocks of the city formed the opposite pole of experience to his calming study of Rodin and his work.

That a close relationship exists between Rilke's early experiences of the city and his interpretive fashioning of Rodin and his work has been consistently overlooked, however. As I will argue, Rilke's understanding of Rodin and sculpture more generally—as developed in his 1903 *Rodin* monograph, contemporaneous letters, and his later lecture on the sculptor—must be considered in terms of a reciprocal relationship with his initial traumas of living in Paris. Rilke's most important experiences during his early stay in Paris—of Rodin's steadfast and solitary work as a sculptor and the city's tumultuous environment—can be understood as the basis for the poet's conception of art as a *making of things*. In his writings on Rodin, Rilke develops a conception of art-making that is divorced from more traditional concerns of beauty and representation, considering it instead in terms of a craft-like production of concrete realities or "art-things" (*Kunst-Dinge*), which take on their own emphatic and solid existence irrespective of their status as visual representation. For Rilke, the dramatic or psychological content of Rodin's sculptures and their manner of presenting the human body are issues of comparatively

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[107] Rilke moved into his apartment at 11, rue Toullier on August 28, 1902, and stayed there until his wife's arrival in Paris in early October. Early accounts of Rilke's fears and distress in the city can be found, among other places, in his letters of August 31, October 17, and December 31, 1902. See Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1929), pp. 21–25, 52–54, and 57–58. As Andreas Huyssen has convincingly argued, Rilke's representation of traumatic experiences in his *Malte* novel (which overlap significantly with accounts in his early letters from Paris), cannot be entirely accounted for by the shocks of the city alone. Malte's (and Rilke's) psychological stress must also be understood as partially rooted in childhood traumas and an early inability to develop adequate psychological shields against external shocks. See Andreas Huyssen, "Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 105–26.

little importance.[108] Struggling amidst the overabundance of fearful shocks and stimuli of the urban environment, Rilke instead appeals to the self-sufficiency, permanence, and resilient *thingness* of Rodin's sculptural works, which appear to transcend the ephemerality and distracting commotion of city life. In Rodin's sculpture, Rilke locates a counter-resistance to the disruptive and destabilizing forces of the city, a *thingly* force that emanates as well from the sculptor himself. Central to this conception of art, as I will work out in detail below, is Rilke's emphasis on a mimetic resemblance between person and artwork, whereby the viewer takes on certain anthropomorphic qualities supposedly found in the "art-thing" itself—imparted to the work by the life and milieu of its maker. In this manner, art-making comes to resemble, for Rilke, an extensive social technology for asserting the agency of the artist out among the broader elements of a particular time and place.[109]

The most important source for observing this development of Rilke's conceptions of art-making and "art-things" can be found in his numerous letters from between 1902 and 1903, which correspond with his first stay in Paris and his later return to the Worpswede area in the summer of 1903. And it is here, as well, that Rilke articulates his

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[108] These were the primary concerns of contemporaneous monographs around 1900, which Rilke studied but departed from significantly. See Ursula Emde, *Rilke und Rodin* (Marburg and Lahn: Verlag des Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminars, 1949), pp. 96–102.

[109] In this sense, Rilke's imaginative understanding of art resembles contemporaneous, anthropological theories of the effects of magical objects and techniques, such as Marcel Mauss [and Henri Hubert], *A General Theory of Magic* [1902], trans. Robert Brain (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). In 1913, Freud would note the animistic and magical residues still attached to contemporary understandings of art. See Freud, *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* [1913] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), p. 141: "In der Kunst allein kommt es noch vor, daß ein von Wünschen verzehrter Mensch etwas der Befriedigung Ähnliches macht und daß dieses Spielen – dank der künstlerischen Illusion – Affektwirkungen hervorruft, als wäre es etwas Reales."

key notion of a "kinship of things." Combining direct experiential accounts of life in Paris with more conceptual formations related to his thinking on Rodin, Rilke's letters from this period reveal the importance of modern, urban experience for the understanding of Rodin's art that he develops at length in the monograph. In the very same letters that document Rilke's fears and anxieties with respect to his urban environment and its inhabitants, Rodin and his work are frequently evoked as a powerful "counterweight" (*Gegengewicht*) or "opposition" (*Widerspruch*) to the chaotic disturbances of the city.[110] After spending four months in Paris (and joined by his wife since early October 1902), Rilke wrote back to the Worpswede-based painter, Otto Modersohn:

> Paris (wir sagen es uns täglich) ist eine schwere, schwere, bange Stadt. Und die schönen Dinge, die da sind, machen mit ihrer strahlenden Ewigkeit doch nicht ganz gut, was man durch die Grausamkeit und Wirrheit der Gassen und die Unnatur der Gärten, Menschen und Dinge leiden muß. Paris hat für mein geängstigtes Gefühl etwas Unsäglich-Banges. Es hat sich ganz verloren, es rast wie ein bahnverirrter Stern auf irgendeinen schrecklichen Zusammenstoß zu. So müssen die Städte gewesen sein, von denen die Bibel erzählt, daß der Zorn Gottes hinter ihnen emporstieg, um sie zu überschütten und zu erschüttern. *Zu alledem ist Rodin ein großer, ruhiger, mächtiger Widerspruch*, die Zeit fließt von ihm ab, und wie er so arbeitet, alle, alle Tage seines langen Lebens, scheint er unantastbar, sakrosankt und beinahe namenlos. Er und sein Werk sind von derselben Art und Wesenheit wie die alten Kathedralen, wie die Dinge im Louvre.[111]

The passage lays out two key features of the conception of art that Rilke develops in relation to Rodin's work. First, against the fearful turmoil of the modern city, Rilke

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[110] In addition to the following block quotation, see as well Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, pp. 52–53: "Oh, wie hielt ich mich da [in Paris] mit Händen und Zähnen an den paar Dingen, die anders waren. An Rodin vor allem, der ein Greis ist und groß. An den Dingen, die er gemacht hat, an den stillen, in sich hineinschreienden Steinen. Ich war im Louvre vor der Gioconda. Ich war vor der Nike von Samothrake, die mir zum erstenmal ein Gefühl von Griechenland gab, von einer Zeit, wo man Siege so feiern wusste. *Das waren Gegengewichte*, gewiß. Aber die Atmosphäre drückte durch alles durch und drückt heute wie am ersten Tage" (emphasis added).

[111] Ibid., pp. 57–58 (emphasis added).

locates a limited form of resistance in a collection of interrelated, aesthetic objects (*die schönen Dinge*), which silently persist amidst the "confusion" (*Wirrheit*) and "artificiality" (*Unnatur*) of the urban environment. In this sense, Rodin's more contemporary sculpture poses an atavistic connection to city's medieval cathedrals and the ancient art and artifacts preserved in the Louvre. Second, with respect to Rodin in particular, Rilke fashions an image of a tireless, working artist who, in remaining impervious to the disturbances of the city, becomes centered and *thing-like* himself.[112] According to Rilke, Rodin's own thingly resistance to the city is something he shares with his own sculptural works, and is that which links him and his art to the much older things of the Parisian cathedrals and artworks in the Louvre.

The notion of a "Verwandtschaft von Dingen," as Rilke would articulate it in a letter the following year, thus takes on for the poet an edifying and protective function with respect to the urban environment. The assertion of a mimetic kinship between artist and art-thing provides the basis, in fact, for Rilke's understanding of Rodin's artistic production as an "opposition" or "counterweight" to urban modernity. In his 1903 monograph on the sculptor, Rilke likens Rodin's work to the sculpture of antiquity, describing their related states-of-being as within a "circle of solitude" (*Kreis der Einsamkeit*) and as "wholly-absorbed-in-themselves" (*Ganz-mit-sich-Beschäftigtsein*) (*KA* IV, 418). Given his persistent characterization of Rodin as a person, Rilke's anthropomorphic account of the solitude and self-absorption of Rodin's sculptures also describes a mimetic kinship between the artist-maker and the made art-thing. After first fashioning Rodin in the monograph as leading a resolute, centered, and solitary existence,

[112] In a related September 17, 1902 letter to painter Heinrich Vogeler, Rilke remarks: "Rodin ist sehr groß, und sehr seinem Werke ähnlich" (*B* I, 40).

Rilke then proceeds to imagine these human qualities as somehow manifest in his artistic products as well. In a converse manner, the characterization of Rodin from the letter quoted above—as "unantastbar, sakrosankt und beinahe namenlos"—can in fact be found to originate in his earlier work on the monograph, as descriptions not for the sculptor but for the sculptural works themselves: "[Das Bildwerk] mußte irgendwie unantastbar, sakrosankt, getrennt vom Zufall und von der Zeit, in der es einsam und wunderbar wie das Gesicht eines Hellsehers aufstand" (*KA* IV, 410).[113] For Rilke, this reciprocal mimetic relationship arises out of an art-making process, whereby the artist and "art-thing" come to resemble one another: the *Kunst-Ding* becoming more person-like and the artist more and more like a nameless thing. Rilke is consistent in this conception even in his direct observations of Rodin at work: "Es ist sehr schön, ihn arbeiten zu sehen. […] er und das Ding, sein Ding; man wüßte kaum mehr zu sagen, welches das Werk ist" (*KA* IV, 491).[114]

According to Rilke, Rodin's ability to replicate in his sculptural work something akin to his own "counterweight" (*Gegengewicht*) or "opposition" (*Widerspruch*) to the city is grounded in his integration of art and life as craftsperson or handworker. As Rilke would express it in his 1905/06 lecture on Rodin, the disassociation of sculpture from the usual aesthetic concerns of beauty and representation—through its reappraisal as a practice of making *things* and *surfaces*—amounts to a reformulation of art as a humble,

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[113] Rilke's description of Rodin's sculptures as "namenlos" can be found throughout the monograph. See, for example, the second paragraph of *Rodin* (*KA* IV, 405).

[114] This statement appears as an unpublished note from the fall of 1902 (during Rilke's work on the *Rodin* monograph), and appears in nearly identical form in a September 28, 1902 letter to wife Clara. See *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, p. 49.

daily activity in resemblance to the workaday world of the preindustrial age: "Aus allen den großen anspruchsvollen und launenhaften Worten scheint die Kunst aufeinmal ins Geringe und Nüchterne gestellt, ins Alltägliche, ins Handwerk" (*KA* IV, 458). This integration of aesthetic production and an atavistic form of everyday life through daily "handwork" hinges, for Rilke, on Rodin's particular way of apprehending the world of things. In his August 8, 1903 letter to Andreas-Salomé, Rilke describes the sculptor's realization of an "equilibrium with respect to the world" (*Gleichgewicht der Welt gegenüber*) through a "way of looking and living" (*Art zu schauen und zu leben*) that he achieves through his sculptural practice (*Bw* 93). As Rilke explains in the same letter, the importance of Rodin's work lies not in its apparent subject matter or thematic content (*Stoff*), his abstract conceptions and intentions as an artist (*Absichten*), or the possible meanings and interpretations of the work (*Deutung*). Citing Rodin's own supposed indifference to such concerns, Rilke describes, "das so unendlich unstoffliche und einfache Element seiner Kunst," and the artist's sculptural production as, "unberührt und rein von Absichten und Stoffen" (*Bw* 93, 95). Instead, Rilke regards Rodin's artistic practice as a "realization" (*Verwirklichung*) of things, arising out of a focused coordination of eyes and hands, in which his "way of looking and living" intertwines with his sculptural production of *Kunst-Dinge* (*Bw* 94).

In the same August 8, 1903 letter, Rilke also stresses the strongly haptic quality of Rodin's visual experience of things, which the sculptor seems to *grasp*, or "surround with seeing" (*mit Schauen umgeben*), as singular, isolated, and self-enclosed surfaces or "systems of surfaces" (*Systeme von Flächen*).[115] Likewise, in his short sketch on Rodin

from the fall of 1902, Rilke describes: "Der Zusammenhang seines Auges mit dem Ton. Man glaubt alle die Wege seines Blicks, die sicheren, schnellen, ein Netz in der Luft bilden zu sehen, darin sich das Ding immer mehr verfängt" (*KA* IV, 491). Rodin's ability to "surround" or "ensnare" the thing with his gaze, to apprehend it as a tactile "system of surfaces," depends, for Rilke, on a mimetic coordination between the sculptor's hands and eyes. Because Rodin was long practiced in the tactile formation of surfaces, he had also developed the visual ability to perceive objects purely as "systems of surfaces," entirely detached from aesthetic concerns of thematic content or idealized form, and everyday concerns of desire for the object or its value and use. The human body most importantly, fragmented or whole, could be perceived and represented as a unified, self-enclosed surface (apprehended, in Rodin's word, as *le modelé*; or, for Rilke, by perceiving and representing the human as a *Ding*).[116]

Rilke's privileging of self-enclosing surfaces in Rodin's sculptural work must also be understood in implicit contrast to the fragmentation and flayed interiority of the body depicted in his 1910 *Malte* novel. The sculptural objects encountered in Rodin's studio suggested to Rilke not only the edifying enclosures of things, but also the fragmentation of body parts like hands, legs, torsos, and faces, as well as the exposed hollow interior of

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[115] Rilke and Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, p. 93: "Immer ist ihm das, was er schaut und mit Schauen umgiebt, das Einzige, die Welt, auf der alles geschieht." My understanding of *haptic vision* in relation to Rilke draws loosely on the work of Aloïs Riegl. For a similar appropriation, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), pp. 543–51.

[116] On Rodin's use of the term *modelé*, see Rilke's September 5, 1902 letter to his wife Clara, in *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, pp. 34–35. Rilke's most emphatic expression for the rendering of humans as *things*, appears in the original 1905 draft to his Rodin lecture: "[*Rodin*] ist der Mann, der, nachdem mans lange nicht mehr gekonnt hat, wieder *Dinge* macht, – wirkliche, auf allen Seiten begrenzte, selbständige Dinge; Dinge aus Männern und Frauen; Dinge über uns hinaus" (*KA* IV, 502).

the unfinished sculptural surface.[117] Thus, in *Malte*, one reads the narrator's horrified description of an impoverished Parisian woman:

> Die Frau erschrak und hob sich aus sich ab, zu schnell, zu heftig, so daß das Gesicht in den zwei Händen blieb. Ich konnte es darin liegen sehen, seine hohle Form. Es kostete mich unbeschreibliche Anstrengung, bei diesen Händen zu bleiben und nicht zu schauen, was sich aus ihnen abgerissen hatte. Mir graute, ein Gesicht von innen zu sehen, aber ich fürchtete mich doch noch viel mehr vor dem bloßen wunden Kopf ohne Gesicht. (*KA* III, 457–58)

In the novel's complex interweaving of the narrator's urban and past childhood traumas, the fragmented body reappears in his childhood story of a disembodied hand (*KA* III, 518–21) and takes on further mimetic registers in young Malte's identification with fragmented and shattering objects (*KA* III, 461, 529–30). In a key episode for Malte's adult experiences in Paris, a mimetic identification with an exposed and fragmented, architectural object leads to a traumatic breakdown of boundaries between inner and outer, animate and inanimate, human and thing: "es war sozusagen nicht die erste Mauer der vorhandenen Häuser [...], sondern die letzte der früheren. Man sah ihre Innenseite" (*KA* III, 485). In his description of the material residues of domestic life left clinging to the exposed interior surface, Malte develops a nauseating comparison with the inner fluids, scraps, and organs of the human body, before concluding with the horrifying recognition: "Ich erkenne das alles hier, und darum geht es so ohne weiteres in mich ein: es ist zu Hause in mir" (*KA* III, 487).[118]

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[117] Rilke's August 8, 1903 letter to Andreas-Salomé already suggests this ambivalent quality of Rodin's fragmentation of the body into sculptural things: "auch Menschen erfahre ich schon manchmal so, Hände leben irgendwo, Munde reden, und ich schaue alles ruhiger und mit größerer Gerechtigkeit" (*Bw* 98).

[118] For a far more detailed discussion of the psychological connections between bodily fragmentation in Malte's childhood and adult urban experiences, see Andreas Huyssen, "Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*."

Along with bodily fragmentation, Rilke's novel also describes the spatial dissolution or voiding of the self in highly ambivalent, mimetic terms. Anticipating Caillois's account of mimetic "depersonalization through assimilation into space," Rilke's novel describes death and disease as a deforming, spatial expansion of the body.[119] The loss of bodily contours also exists in Rilke's writings in the mimetic assimilation to dark spaces. This takes more positive forms in Malte's childhood merging with "familiar, intimate things" (*die gewohnten herzlichen Dinge*) in his darkened bedroom (see the paragraph beginning "O Nacht ohne Gegenstände" (*KA* III, 507)), as well as in the *Jugendstil*-like interweaving of body and things during the night in Rilke's 1900 poem "Gebet" collected in the 1902 version of *Buch der Bilder* (*KA* I, 284). But this spatial dissolution of the self also has a destructive side. In the *Malte* novel, the narrator describes the frightening effects of the darkened space of a high vaulted room from his childhood: "Dieser hohe, [...] gewölbte Raum [...] saugte mit seiner dunkelnden Höhe, mit seinen niemals ganz aufgeklärten Ecken alle Bilder aus einem heraus [...]. Man saß da wie aufgelöst; [...] wie eine leere Stelle" (*KA* III, 471).

In contrast to these unstable and potentially destructive, mimetic relations with fragmented objects and unbounded spaces, Rilke projects onto Rodin the fantasy of a thingly "integrity" (*Zusammenfassung*) and "unity" (*Einheit*) shared by the artist and art-thing, capable of extending its edifying effects outward to anonymous recipients of the work.[120] Crucial for these imagined effects is Rilke's notion that the aesthetic experience

[119] See Malte's account of his grandfather's death as a corporeal expansion (*KA* III, 459–64), as well as the description of his own diseases as a tumorous, expansive growth: "das Große" (*KA* III, 497). Cf. Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," in *The Edge of Surrealism*, quoted here, p. 100.

of self-enclosed art-things ("Rodins Dinge, die Dinge an den gothischen Kathedralen, die antikischen Dinge, – alle Dinge, die vollkommene Dinge sind") was capable of transforming the viewer's perception of other external objects, as well, into an ossified and non-threatening accumulation of things: "[Die Kunst-Dinge] wiesen mich auf die Vorbilder hin; auf die bewegte lebendige Welt, einfach und ohne Deutung gesehen als Anlaß zu Dingen" (*Bw* 98).

As Rilke describes it, Rodin's comparable ability to see *things* in all objects, human and nonhuman, allowed him to give his *way of perceiving* a lasting, material form:

> Da es ihm gegeben ward, Dinge zu sehen in allem, erwarb er die Möglichkeit: Dinge zu bauen; denn dieses ist seine große Kunst. [...] Das Ding ist bestimmt, das Kunst-Ding muß noch bestimmter sein; von allem Zufall fortgenommen, jeder Unklarheit entrückt, der Zeit enthoben und dem Raum gegeben, ist es dauernd geworden, fähig zur Ewigkeit. Das Modell *scheint*, das Kunst-Ding *ist*. So ist das eine der namenlose Fortschritt über das andere hinaus, die stille und steigende Verwirklichung des Wunsches, zu sein, der von allem in der Natur ausgeht. (*Bw* 93–94)

For Rilke, Rodin's balance or equilibrium with respect to the world was achieved through his trained, visual experience of objects. His ability to see "things" (*Dinge*) in everything enabled him to produce a corresponding physical reality that had a definite and lasting form: a *Kunst-Ding*. In this manner, the artist's "way of looking and living" (*Art zu schauen und zu leben*) could take on a solid, material form, and replicate a similar way of experiencing the world—via his distributed sculptural objects located in the shared space of the city.

As Rilke claims in his *Rodin* monograph, the long history of sculpture reveals an art form, "die mehr giebt als Wort und Bild, mehr als Gleichnis und Schein" (*KA* IV, 408). The lasting significance of sculpture, for Rilke, rests not in the meaning or

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[120] See, quoted here, Rilke's June 24, 1907 letter to his wife Clara from Paris (*B* I, 172). The relevant passage is reproduced in footnote 53 above.

verisimilitude of the work, but rather in how it entails a "becoming-thing" (*Dingwerdung*) of its maker's disposition. With respect to Rodin, in particular, Rilke considered his sculptural works as a means of giving extended material form to the sculptor's own resolute life as a craftsman, which, for Rilke, enabled him to resist the disturbances of modern urban life. As Rilke writes in that same August 8, 1903 letter to Andreas-Salomé:

> [Rodin] hat gleich Dinge gemacht, viele Dinge, und aus ihnen erst hat er die neue Einheit gebildet oder aufwachsen lassen, und so sind diese Zusammenhänge innig und gesetzmäßig geworden, weil nicht Ideen, sondern Dinge sich gebunden haben. [...] Und je mehr die Dinge um ihn wuchsen, desto seltener waren die Störungen, die ihn erreichten; denn an den Wirklichkeiten, die um ihn standen, brachen alle Geräusche ab. Sein Werk selbst hat ihn beschützt; er hat darin gewohnt wie in einem Wald, und sein Leben muß schon lange dauern, denn was er selbst gepflanzt hat, ist ein Hochwald geworden. (*Bw* 95–96)

Here, as elsewhere, it is largely irrelevant for Rilke what Rodin's sculptural works might represent, communicate, or signify; they are far more important for what they *do*: they "protect" (*beschützen*) the artist from the "disturbances" (*Störungen*) of the city. As Rilke also indicates, this protective power of Rodin's work extends its effects to other humans, as well. In an earlier August 1903 letter to Andreas-Salomé, Rilke describes his experience in the vicinity of Rodin's work as occupying a kind of protective shelter (*im Schutze*) from the intense fears that would later grip him in Paris (*Bw* 85). And in even earlier letters sent from Paris, the city's cathedrals and the sculpture in the Louvre are evoked alongside Rodin's work as sites of refuge, calm, and solitude amidst the tumult of the city.[121] The source of this influence, as Rilke indicates for Rodin, is a mimetic

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[121] See Rilke's September 16, 1902 letter to his wife Clara: "[Die Kathedralen] sind die Einsamkeit und die Stille, die Zuflucht und Ruhe im Wechsel und Wirrwarr dieser Gassen." See also his December 31, 1902 letter to Otto Modersohn: "[Rodin] und sein Werk sind von derselben

resemblance between maker and work. That the characteristics of the maker are replicated and embodied in the artwork allows Rilke to imagine the artist extending an influence and agency via their work out into the realm of external relations.

Admittedly, Rilke's discussion of Rodin, and *Kunst-Dinge* in general, is highly idiosyncratic and at odds with contemporaneous Western reception of the sculptural arts. His notion of a "kinship" among artists and art-things, as well as the power of sculpture to protect one from the intrusions of the urban environment, is clearly part of some regressive fantasy. Taking these ideas seriously, however, is highly productive for understanding a crucial aspect of Rilke's contemporaneous poetic production. His attempt to stage mimetic and animistic relations to things in the 1905/06 *Rodin* lecture, as discussed in the previous section, already indicates that Rilke was well aware of the difficulties involved in evoking this kind of experience of objects. In many of the poems collected in the *Neue Gedichte*, Rilke moves beyond strategies of merely evoking and staging such encounters with things for his audience and readers. In a number of instances, as I will show, Rilke engages with the poetic medium as a means not only to stage an encounter with things, but also to *performatively* enact their transformative influence on the reader. The kind of transformative effects that Rilke himself experiences through the work of Rodin becomes the model for his poetry of things. The thing-poem must *do* to the reader what the art-thing *does* to the viewer. It is in this sense that I read Rilke's attempt to produce *geschriebene Dinge* in resemblance to the *plastische Dinge* of Rodin.

Art und Wesenheit wie die alten Kathedralen, wie die Dinge im Louvre." Both letters in Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, pp. 44 and 57–58, respectively.

The Thing-Poem

In his innovative 1984 study *Batterien der Lebenskraft*, Christoph Asendorf takes his title directly from a formulation of Rilke's. The phrase originates in an apologetic 1919 letter to Ilse Erdmann, where Rilke admits of his "ins Bürgerliche und Zimmerliche verringerten Mythisierung" of things (*B* II, 134). In the letter, Rilke further acknowledges a potentially pathological dimension of his fixation on *Dinge*, and yet defends himself nonetheless for holding to a certain "superstitious belief" (*Aberglaube*) in the most insignificant objects as "bearers of powers" (*Träger von Mächten*) over humans: "Spardosen: ja das wars, was ich von Anfang an meinte, so kamen mir immer alle diese Talismänner vor, sie sammeln, kleine Batterien der Lebenskraft, von uns geladen, mit dem, was wir sonst an die zufällige zerstreuende Luft abgeben" (*B* II, 135). As Asendorf explains it, this retrospective account reveals a crucial aspect of Rilke's earlier *Dinggedichte*, and his *Dingkult* more generally: "der Vergleich mit der Batterie verweist ironisch auf die Parallelität der technischen und der imaginativen Transformations-verfahren."[122] Unleashing the power of things requires that they first be figuratively "charged" (*geladen*) with some vital life-force of humans. The comparison with "Talismänner" suggests only further that the affecting force of the thing is derived from a power beyond itself. To bring about an imaginative transformation in his reader's experience of things, Rilke admits the need for an artificial, poetic procedure.

Rilke's shift to staging (rather than simply evoking) mimetic relations to objects in his 1905/06 *Rodin* lecture is already a strong indication of his new attempt to control

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[122] Christoph Asendorf, *Batterien der Lebenskraft: Zur Geschichte der Dinge und ihrer Wahrnehmung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Gießen: Anabas-Verlag, 1984), p. 136.

and instantiate a transformative experience of things for his audience. In subsequently written poems found in the *Neue Gedichte* (1907) and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908), Rilke uses the poetic medium to take this one step further: not only for staging an experience of things, but also for performatively enacting their powers on the reader. In specific instances, the poem becomes a means of artificially producing this force of things. Rilke's 1919 letter suggests that things are not agents in themselves, but rather intentional sites for the storage and transfer of human-derived forces. In the vitalistic language of Rilke's 1919 letter, this procedure is imagined through a direct contact with things in order to transfer some human life-force, which would otherwise dissipate in the blowing breeze.

Among his so-called "thing-poems," Rilke's 1907 poem "Der Ball" holds a special place for a number of reasons. Most well-known is an anecdotal account of Rilke's proclaiming: "Da habe ich gar nichts als das fast Unaussprechbare einer reinen Bewegung ausgesprochen – und darum ist es mein bestes Gedicht."[123] Beyond its formal characteristics, which are indelibly linked to the rising and falling motion of a thrown ball, Rilke's poem also entails a *charging* and *transferring* of human energies, in a manner similar to his 1919 account of things as "Batterien der Lebenskraft." Rilke's "Der Ball" is not only a poetic rendering of the flight of the thrown object, but also a treatment of the ball as a thingly medium for enacting a transformative relationship between humans. The thing functions as both a storage site for the vital human warmth of the

[123] See Elisabeth von Schmidt-Pauli, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Ein Gedenkbuch* (Basel: Benno Schwabe & Co., 1940), p. 20.

thrower and a site for that energy's transformation as it is transferred to the catcher of the ball.

> Du Runder, der das Warme aus zwei Händen
> im Fliegen, oben, fortgiebt, sorglos wie
> sein Eigenes; was in den Gegenständen
> nicht bleiben kann, zu unbeschwert für sie,
>
> zu wenig Ding und doch noch Ding genug,
> um nicht aus allem draußen Aufgereihten
> unsichtbar plötzlich in uns einzugleiten:
> das glitt in dich, du zwischen Fall und Flug
>
> noch Unentschlossener: der, wenn er steigt,
> als hätte er ihn mit hinaufgehoben,
> den Wurf entführt und freiläßt – , und sich neigt
> und einhält und den Spielenden von oben
> auf einmal eine neue Stelle zeigt,
> sie ordnend wie zu einer Tanzfigur,
>
> um dann, erwartet und erwünscht von allen,
> rasch, einfach, kunstlos, ganz Natur,
> dem Becher hoher Hände zuzufallen. (*KA* I, 583–84)

Like Rilke's 1919 letter, the poem obscures any direct statement of what this human energy might be ("was in den Gegenständen / nicht bleiben kann"). Similar to the warmth of hands that is dispersed during the ball's flight, there is a some*thing* ("zu wenig Ding und doch noch Ding genug") that is stored and transferred in the ball. As in the letter, it is a something, "was wir sonst an die zufällige zerstreuende Luft abgeben." However Rilke understands this vital force exactly, it is perhaps far less interesting in itself than the transformation that its transference entails.

Consistent with my argument thus far, the transformation described in Rilke's "Der Ball" implies a mimetic relationship between human and thing. One aspect of this is simply the immediate, tactile contact and correspondence between the ball and the "cup" of human hands (*Becher hoher Hände*). Here, the mimetic plays out in the direct

corporeal contact with the material thing and the human body shaping itself to match the contours of the thing. On a more abstract level, the flight-path of the ball also provokes an additional mimetic reaction in the players' bodies: in tracing out the balls trajectory and moving to meet it at "eine neue Stelle," the players are transformed into a "Tanzfigur" that resembles the flight-path of the ball. Their imitation of the ball's movement in the air amounts to an aesthetic transformation akin to a dance. In both of these senses, the thrown ball provokes an mimetic reaction in the human, a movement to match and correspond to the animated nature of the thing. Rilke's suggestion of a human thrower at the beginning of the poem (whose warmth of hands is transferred to the ball) adds a further complexity to the mimetic relationship between human and thing. The ball is additionally a mediator between human thrower and catcher, tying them together through the vital energy that is stored and transferred in the throw. Through this connection, the mimetic transformation provoked by the ball can be traced back to an original human action: the throw.

The figure of the ball-throw in Rilke's larger body of work is complex and heterogeneous. In appears early on in the first section of his *Stunden-Buch* (1899) as part of a meditation on God (*KA* I, 167), and reappears in later poems as a vision of human life at the mercy of natural laws and cosmic forces.[124] Rilke's figure of the ball-throw and thrower also exhibits poetological dimensions, and it is here that I situate my reading. An earlier poem from the *Neue Gedichte*, "Eranna an Sappho," already suggests such a reading, describing the Greek poetess as a "wilde weite Werferin," whose reader Eranna

[124] See for example, "Solang du Selbstgeworfnes fängst" (*KA* II, 195–96), and "Das (nicht vorhandene) Kindergrab mit dem Ball" (*KA* II, 367–68).

is figuratively "thrown" and transformed by her poetry: "Dein Erklingen / warf mich weit" (*KA* I, 451). I take a further cue from a 1915 letter of Rilke's to Marianne Mitford, in which he reflects on his difficulties as a poet: "Ich komme mir ehrlich vor wie ein Ball, der immer wieder aus guten Händen ins Helle und Heitre hinaufgeworfen wird, dorthin, wo er so von Herzen rund und leicht sein darf, – aber was ist das? – Er fällt nicht wieder in seine Hände zurück, er verrollt schmählich" (*KA* I, 1003). In describing this failed instance of the thrown ball, a failed reception, Rilke's letter suggests a poetological reading for the successful ball-throw in his earlier poem: the ball as a metaphor for the poetic medium; the throw as a model for the successful or failed exchange between poet and reader. For the poet, the identification with a thrown-and-dropped ball indicates a failed rapport with the reader; the ball has been thrown, but fails to be met with receptive hands. Rilke's "Der Ball" exemplifies rather the ideal transfer between thrower and catcher, with the thrower's action creating a mimetic transformation in the receiver of the ball. Read metaphorically and poetologically, the ball comes to stand for the poem, and the throw for the poetic act of the writer. In Rilke's language, the ball liberates and abducts (*entführt*) the creative act itself (*den Wurf*), gives it an extended, embodied form (*der Ball*), and enables the thrower to secure from a distance a transformative influence on the receivers (*sie ordnend wie zu einer Tanzfigur*).

Rilke's "Der Ball," I would argue, can also be read as an important programmatic text within the *Neue Gedichte*. The poem's depiction of the thrown ball's transformative effects provides a more general model for the operation of the successful "thing-poem." In a good number of instances, as I will demonstrate, Rilke treats the poetic medium as a means for provoking a related transformation in the reader. The thing of the poem

operates in a manner similar to the thrown ball: as a mediator between the poet (thrower) and the reader (catcher), which simulates a mimetic transformation in the reader of the poem. The exact nature of the thing represented is perhaps of less interest than the transformative effect that Rilke intends it to have on the reader. As in "Der Ball," the thing serves to embody some intentional, external force. In his extensive reflections on things, Rilke generally avoids attributing this force to himself as the poet, and suggests rather that it is latent in the object itself. Yet, as his later "Batterien der Lebenskraft" formulation acknowledges, it ultimately rests with the human to artificially construct these effects. Through his analogy with batteries, Rilke admits of the technical procedure required to bring about an imaginative transformation in the experience of things. Whatever mimetic powers Rilke finds latent in things themselves, he must resort to artificially staging their experience and performing their effects through the medium of poetry.

I have already suggested such a reading for Rilke's 1907 poem "Die Rosenschale." I will now turn to a selection of poems that demonstrate Rilke's attempt to perform and actualize for the reader the type of mimetic powers he finds latent in things. These include "Tanagra" written in July 1906, "Der Käferstein" from the summer of 1908, and the series of three Buddha poems composed in late 1905, July 1906, and the summer of 1908. These selections appear across both volumes of the *Neue Gedichte*, and might also be situated in relation to the shifting concerns and poetic refinement of Rilke's middle period.[125] My readings, however, will not tackle the tricky question of an internal

development in Rilke's production of the two-volume *Neue Gedichte*, nor will I attempt to make general claims about these poetry collections in general. As is frequently noted, the heterogeneity of the collections and their frequent use of biblical and classical references make their overall designation as "thing-poems" highly suspect. Instead, I want to focus on those poems that most closely engage with the type of stable and edifying relations to things, which Rilke privileges in his early writings from Paris. Not surprisingly, the poems that fit most closely with my reading concern sculptural objects that exhibit a close kinship with the "art-things" of Rodin. In turning to Rilke's poetry, we can observe how the poet attempts to secure and instantiate a related influence of art-things—not simply evoked for the viewer of sculptural art—but rather staged and performed through the medium of poetry. In the poetic texts, as in his treatment of Rodin's sculpture, Rilke derives the agency of the "Kunst-Ding" from its materiality and its power to cause mimetic transformations in the human.

The title of Rilke's poem "Tanagra" evokes a set of famous terracotta figurines produced in the fourth and third centuries BCE. Unearthed in the second half of the nineteenth century in tombs around the ancient Greek city of Tanagra, the figurines were quickly acquired and exhibited in the Musée du Louvre. It was here that Rilke first saw them in September 1902, writing back to his wife from Paris: "Tanagra. Das ist eine Quelle unvergänglichen Lebens!"[126] While late nineteenth-century audiences valued the

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[125] See for example, Brigitte L. Bradley, "Rilkes Buddha-Gedichte von 1905 und 1906: Werkstufen in der Auffassung und Realisierung von 'Geschlossenheit,'" in *Rilke heute*, ed. Ingeborg H. Solbrig and Joachim W. Storck (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 27–35.

[126] Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis* 1906, p. 45. Rilke may very well had the Tanagra figurines in mind when writing the *Rodin* monograph later that year: "[Im Louvre] waren Steine,

small figurines for their realistic depictions of human figures and fashions, Rilke entirely ignores their status as figurative representation. His poem appeals instead to their materiality as "ein wenig gebrannter Erde," and suggests to the reader a gesture of *reaching* and *grasping*, which transforms the viewer into a likeness of the thing:

> Ein wenig gebrannter Erde,
> wie von großer Sonne gebrannt.
> Als wäre die Gebärde
> einer Mädchenhand
> auf einmal nicht mehr vergangen;
> ohne nach etwas zu langen,
> zu keinem Dinge hin
> aus ihrem Gefühle führend,
> nur an sich selber rührend
> wie eine Hand ans Kinn.
>
> Wir heben und wir drehen
> eine und eine Figur;
> wir können fast verstehen
> weshalb sie nicht vergehen, –
> aber wir sollen nur
> tiefer und wunderbarer
> hängen an dem was war
> und lächeln: ein wenig klarer
> vielleicht als vor einem Jahr. (*KA* I, 477–78)

The poem sustains a tension throughout between the temporal persistence of the art-thing—its "unvergängliches Leben," as Rilke calls it in his letter—and a fleeting gesture of grasping at nothing, the hand closing in on itself: "ohne nach etwas zu langen, / zu keinem Dinge hin / aus ihrem Gefühle führend, / nur an sich selber rührend." As suggested in the first stanza, something like this fleeting gesture is preserved in the baked earth of the Tanagra figurine. As the poem turns from the first to second stanza, a collective and inclusive viewership (*wir*) is introduced to appreciate the work. In a close imitation of the work's gestural quality, the "we" is impelled to sustain a *grasp* of the

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[...] die eine Bewegung trugen, eine Gebärde, die so Frisch geblieben war, als sollte sie hier nur aufbewahrt und eines Tages irgend einem Kinde gegeben werde, das vorüberkam" (*KA* IV, 406).

figurine: both in the literal sense of "lifting" (*heben*) and "turning" (*drehen*) the figurine, and as a figurative "understanding" (*verstehen*) of the art-things persistence. Through a repeated negation of the verb "vergehen," the lasting material existence of the thing in the second stanza is solidly linked to the grasping gesture of the "Mädchenhand" in the first. At the same time, the grasping gesture inherent to the sculpture in the first stanza appears repeated by the collective "we" in the second. Thus the "we" appears transformed into an imitative likeness of the thing. As the concluding lines of the poem suggest, this gestural imitation of the art-thing results in an obscure, yet edifying transformation in the viewer of the work: "wir sollen nur / tiefer und wunderbarer / hängen an dem was war / und lächeln: ein wenig klarer / vielleicht als vor einem Jahr." Whatever clarity is gained through the experience, it is indelibly linked to a mimetic resemblance between human and thing, a kinship through a shared persistence of gesture.

As the "Tanagra" poem clearly demonstrates, there can be little talk of "objective description" (*objektive Beschreibung*) in Rilke's so-called *Dinggedichte*, as Oppert claims. Without the title to indicate a referent-object, the exact thing of the poem would in fact remain largely unidentifiable. Even Oppert admits as much of Rilke, undercutting much of his own definition of the *Dinggedicht*: "doch ohne Titel [müßte] manches seiner Gedichte gar ein Rätsel bleiben. Der Titel ist die eigentliche Voraussetzung fürs Gedicht: setzte nicht er uns im voraus das Ding als ein Ganzes, fast wie ein Bild, das mit dem Zeigestock 'gedeutet' werden soll, vors innere Auge, so wären wir eben nicht 'im Bilde.'"[127] The function of many titles in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* is simply to point to an original prototype-object that would otherwise remain obscure in the poetic text. The

[127] Oppert, "Das Dinggedicht," p. 775.

poem then *re-presents* the named objects—but not in the manner of mimetic realism. Rather, representation is just as much about the physical materiality of the artwork itself and its ability to *stand in for* some intentional force that lies beyond the thing and yet is manifested through it. In the case of Rilke's poems, this quality of representation has little to do with textuality or the materiality of the poetic text itself. Rather it is engaged in a performative manner, by evoking a somatic experience of the thing's materiality and performing the effect of its agency on the reader. As Oppert suggests, the poem's title produces an image of the represented thing in the reader's mind. The poem is thus set up to stage for the reader an artificial encounter with the thing in question. In the example of "Tanagra," this staged, fictional encounter can even transcend the corresponding real-life experience, allowing the reader to imagine "lifting" and "turning" an ancient figurine in their hands, an encounter expressly forbidden by its exhibition in the Louvre. As such poems of Rilke's unfold, the reader finds not a mimetically realistic depiction of the titular thing, but rather is led to experience the simulated effects of its supposed agency over the human. The production of these effects, as further examples will attest, lies in the mimetic powers that Rilke imagines in things: their ability to produce edifying similarities between human and thing. In this way, Rilke's use of the poetic medium attempts to control and artificially produce a positive, mimetic relationship with things.

In the "Tanagra" poem, the reader is invited to experience the transformative effects of the sculptural work through the inclusive pronoun "wir." In other poems like "Die Rosenschale," Rilke addresses the reader even more directly with the pronoun "du." Here, the poet is even more explicit in his attempt to stage for his readers an experience of things and to perform their imagined agency over the human. Rilke's 1908 poem "Der

Käferstein," which appears near the end of *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, proceeds in a similar manner:

> Sind nicht Sterne fast in deiner Nähe
> und was giebt es, das du nicht umspannst,
> da du dieser harten Skarabäe
> Karneolkern gar nicht fassen kannst
>
> ohne jenen Raum, der ihre Schilder
> niederhält, auf deinem ganzen Blut
> mitzutragen; niemals war er milder,
> näher, hingegebener. Er ruht
>
> seit Jahrtausenden auf diesen Käfern,
> wo ihn keiner braucht und unterbricht;
> und die Käfer schließen sich und schläfern
> unter seinem wiegenden Gewicht. (*KA* I, 585)

In this case, the thing of the poem is quite clear: a small scarab amulet, sculpted in carnelian. An experience of the sculpted object is directly staged for the reader, encouraging one to imagine grasping these hard, stone figures in one's hand. The transformative effect that is performed through the poem, however, is far more obscure and can be better elucidated with a look at Rilke's other writings on "Egyptian things" (*Bw* 316). What is clear from the beginning, though, is that the transformative effect of the thing works to affirm the unlikely, opening proposition: "Sind nicht Sterne fast in deiner Nähe / und was giebt es, das du nicht umspannst"?

Rilke's interest in "Egyptian things" was first piqued through his wife Clara's extended stay in Cairo beginning in January 1907. While she had direct experiences of ancient Egyptian art and architecture in the land of their origin, Rilke was left to imagine their forceful effects from afar. Studying an atlas of Egypt in a villa residence on the island of Capri, Rilke wrote to his wife with a speculative account of the powerful

presence of the Egyptian Sphinx—a work he could only experience at the time as a photographic image:

> Die Morgen von Jahrtausenden, ein Volk von Winden, der Aufstieg und Niedergang unzähliger Sterne, der Sternbilder großes Dastehen, die Glut dieser Himmel und ihre Weite war da und war immer wieder da, einwirkend, nicht ablassend von der tiefen Gleichgültigkeit dieses Gesichtes, so lange, bis es zu schauen schien, bis es alle Anzeichen eines Schauens genau dieser Bilder aufwies, bis es sich aufhob wie das Gesicht zu einem Innern, darin alles dies enthalten war und Anlaß und Lust und Not zu alledem. [...] Ich denke mir: es muß so sein, unendlicher Raum, Raum, der hinter den Sternen weitergeht, muß, glaub ich, um dieses Bild [die Sphinx] herum entstanden sein. (*B* I, 164)

Rilke's discussion of the Sphinx in this 1907 letter exhibits remarkable similarities with his poetic treatment of the scarab in his poem from the following year. In both cases, Rilke imagines a millennia-long influence of celestial forces (*Sterne*), preserved and contained in these ancient manmade things, and a cosmic space (*Raum*) that comes to rest and cling to their sculpted surfaces. As should be clear from both texts, Rilke's understanding of the power of these artifacts is not based on any anthropological or historical knowledge of their original meaning or purpose. Rather, they become for him further material markers for the kind of transformative power that he imagines to emanate from "art-things."

For the present purposes, Rilke's knowledge about Egyptian artifacts (or lack thereof) is of much less interest than his treatment of their imaginary powers in the poetic medium. By juxtaposing the letter account with the poem, it becomes clear that Rilke is attempting to reproduce in miniature, through his "Käferstein" poem, the kind of *thingly* power that he imagines preserved in the Sphinx. Like Rilke's Sphinx, the ancient scarab continues to rest, for thousands of years (*seit Jahrtausenden*), under the gently rocking weight of space (*unter seinem wiegenden Gewicht*). Like Rilke's Sphinx, the scarab is

surrounded by an endless space that expands beyond the stars (*unendlicher Raum, Raum, der hinter den Sternen weitergeht*). While Rilke can only evoke this powerful presence for the massive Sphinx, his poem finds a way to enact something similar through the smaller artifact. The millennia-long condensation of cosmic space around the scarab can be experienced by the human as well, as the poem suggests, by simply enclosing these things in the palm of one's hand: "da du dieser harten Skarabäe / Karneolkern gar nicht fassen kannst / ohne jenen Raum, der ihre Schilder / niederhält, auf deinem ganzen Blut / mitzutragen." Enclosing the artifact in one's hand enables a magical transference of properties from the thing to the body of the human. The human assimilates the same cosmic, spatial quality in the likeness of the thing. In affirming the opening proposition (*Sind nicht Sterne fast in deiner Nähe*), Rilke's poem again relies on a mimetic transformation: the human undergoes a positive transformation through a somatic contact and mimetic imitation of the thing.

The final selection of poems I will discuss can be read to exemplify a full range of positive, mimetic relations that Rilke imagines between humans and things. Examples of an edification of the human through a resemblance with things. The thing of the poems is once more a sculptural object: a statue of Buddha, most likely modeled on a Buddha sculpture in the garden of Rodin's Meudon residence, where Rilke stayed between September 1905 and May 1906.[128] The three Buddha poems that Rilke wrote between late 1905 and 1908 and included in his two-volume *Neue Gedichte* are each complex in themselves, and can be read collectively to demonstrate shifting emphases in the

[128] On Rodin's Buddha statue, see Rilke's letters to his wife Clara on September 20, 1905 and January 11, 1906, in *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, pp. 262–63 and 290.

Dinglyrik of Rilke's middle period.[129] To conclude the discussion, however, I would like to turn to these poems in an attempt to categorize the different mimetic registers that appear throughout Rilke's thing-centered poetry. While the thing of all three poems is ostensibly the same—a Buddha statue—the three poems perform for the reader a range of different, mimetic relations through which to experience the sculptural work. These correspond roughly to three different aspects of the sculptural work: (1) its figurative quality; (2) its materiality; and (3) its *thingness*, which (as in the scarab, the Tanagra figurines, and the sculpture of Rodin) corresponds to the artwork's undying persistence, its self-containment, and yet its close resemblance to the human, despite being forever closed off to their mortal lives. In staging an encounter with the Buddha statue in contrasting but related manners, Rilke's poems reveal the different ways by which the human comes to resemble the thing.

In the first "Buddha" poem of the *Neue Gedichte*, written toward the end of 1905, Rilke encourages a collective "wir" to respond to the sculpture's figurative nature:

> Als ob er horchte. Stille: eine Ferne …
> Wir halten ein und hören sie nicht mehr.
> Und er ist Stern. Und andre große Sterne,
> die wir nicht sehen, stehen um ihn her.
>
> O er ist Alles. Wirklich, warten wir,
> daß er uns sähe? Sollte er bedürfen?
> Und wenn wir hier uns vor ihm niederwürfen,
> er bliebe tief und träge wie ein Tier. (*KA* I, 462)

As Rilke stages it for the reader, the collective encounter with the Buddha figure proceeds according to imitative reactions, as if the statue were a living figure. It appears to be listening, and "we" attempt to listen closely, as well. It appears to be looking, but

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[129] See Bradley, "Rilkes Buddha-Gedichte von 1905 und 1906."

"we" cannot see what it sees. If "we" were to lower ourselves before it, it would respond with mute indifference—lowly as well, "wie ein Tier." Through this staged mimetic play, the Buddha figure is revealed in its thingly otherness to the lives of humans. The poem concludes:

> Denn das, was uns zu seinen Füßen reißt,
> das kreist in ihm seit Millionen Jahren.
> Er, der vergißt was wir erfahren
> und der erfährt was uns verweist. (*KA* I, 462)

The affinity is maintained between the human and thing, yet the poem ultimately denies any profound transformation.

A similar conclusion is reached in the second "Buddha" poem composed in the summer of 1906. Here, however, the connection between human and thing is not established through the imitation of the sculpture's figurative qualities, but rather through its materiality:

> Schon von ferne fühlt der fremde scheue
> Pilger, wie es golden von ihm träuft;
> so als hätten Reiche voller Reue
> ihre Heimlichkeiten aufgehäuft.
>
> Aber näher kommend wird er irre
> vor der Hoheit dieser Augenbraun:
> denn das sind nicht ihre Trinkgeschirre
> und die Ohrgehänge ihrer Fraun.
>
> Wüßte einer denn zu sagen, welche
> Dinge eingeschmolzen wurden, um
> dieses Bild auf diesem Blumenkelche
>
> aufzurichten: stummer, ruhiggelber
> als ein goldenes und rundherum
> auch den Raum berührend wie sich selber. (*KA* I, 489)

The final line of the poem anticipates the later "Käferstein" poem with a similar "touching of space" on the sculpture's surface. The closeness between the human and this spatial quality of the thing, however, is arrived at in a different manner. Here it is the

material accretion of domestic belongings, which entwines the human and thing. The approaching pilgrim knows that the sculpture is made of melted-down domestic objects ("Trinkgeschirre" and "Ohrgehänge"), but cannot determine, "welche Dinge eingeschmolzen wurden, um / dieses Bild [...] / aufzurichten." The poem includes the pilgrim, too, in this kingdom-wide accretion of metallic things. He feels a part of the sculpture's material formation, "wie es golden von ihm träuft." Through the pilgrim's approach, this sense of a material accretion in the metal sculpture is given a human dimension: as a gathering site for humans and their material possessions. Through this material connection between the statue and the domestic lives of humans, the poem evokes a collective gathering around the thing, which forms a peaceful and closed-off center to the human life that circles around it.

The third Buddha poem from 1908 (and the concluding poem of *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*), "Buddha in der Glorie," presents an emphatic encounter with the sculptural work, and this time attempts to perform its transformative effect on the reader directly. As in "Der Käferstein" and "Die Rosenschale," one is addressed directly with "du," and is incited to transform oneself in the likeness of the titular thing. Following an opening stanza, in which the Buddha figure is greeted as "Mitte aller Mitten, Kern der Kerne," the poem continues:

> Sieh, du fühlst, wie nichts mehr an dir hängt;
> im Unendlichen ist deine Schale,
> und dort steht der starke Saft und drängt.
> Und von außen hilft ihm ein Gestrahle,
>
> denn ganz oben werden deine Sonnen
> voll und glühend umgedreht.
> Doch in dir ist schon begonnen,
> was die Sonnen übersteht. (*KA* I, 586)

What was denied in the first two "Buddha" poems comes to fruition in the third. Whereas before, the human was left to the periphery of the Buddha's center, denied any knowledge of its thingly existence, the "Buddha in der Glorie" poem performs for its reader the transformation of becoming like the Buddha, becoming like an eternally centered and self-enclosed thing, "was die Sonnen übersteht." The two-volume *Neue Gedichte* thus concludes with perhaps the most emphatic and powerful instance of Rilke's performative strategy.

In simulating this "kinship" between humans and things through the poetic medium, Rilke is clearly evoking an impossible and fantastic transformation that is expressly denied in modernity. As Benjamin would later argue, the mimetic powers that things had exhibited in the past have entirely withered away for the modern human. Residues of a mimetic kinship with things are preserved in the behavior of children, however any widespread mimetic relations in modernity are limited to their distorted and pathological forms, as Adorno would later describe. Yet, by situating Rilke's *Dinglyrik* and writings on Rodin in relation to his accounts of urban experience, we can observe a similar dialectic in the poet's understanding of thing-relations. Rilke's discussions of a "mimicry" and "kinship" between humans and things are of particular interest in relation to early twentieth-century mimetic theory, since these discussions emerge out of Rilke's direct, concrete experiences of urban modernity and visual art. In his attempts to stage positive, mimetic or animistic relations to things in his *Rodin* lecture and perform them through his contemporaneous poetic work, Rilke is implicitly aware of the impossibility of returning to such an intimate "kinship" with things. The broader assessment of Rilke's writing at the time, including his Parisian letters and *Malte* novel, displays the instability

and pathological potential of such mimetic relations. In attempting to control and shore up a more positive, mimetic relation with things through his poetry, Rilke remains thoroughly aware of the fictionality of his "kinship of things." In the absence of any real transformative power or agency of the artwork, Rilke must perform their imagined effects for the reader through his poetry of things.

2

THE URBAN UNCANNY, 1910:
Modernist Literature, Animation Films, and Animistic Anxieties

> *A wall which is alive is dreadful; but utensils, furniture, houses and their roofs also lean, crowd around, lie in wait, or pounce.*
>
> — Gilles Deleuze

In a short literary sketch first published in 1909, the Austrian writer and critic Alfred Polgar presented his readers with a vivid portrayal of the neurotic city-dweller. The text, titled simply, "Die Dinge," consists of a first-person account of the narrator's neurosis: his fear that the inanimate objects in his apartment are conspiring against him.

> Ich bewohne ein kleines, stilles Quartier. Ich weiß nicht, wer nebenan, wer über und unter mir haust. Ruhige Leute jedenfalls, denn außer der verworrenen Unruhe der Straße dringt kein Geräusch in meine Wohnung. [...] Ich liebe die Einsamkeit; aber die Einsamkeit meiner Wohnung liebe ich nicht. Weil ich ein tiefes Mißtrauen gegen die Dinge in ihr, gegen Möbel, Stühle, Spiegel und die ganze unbelebte Staffage habe und mich ihnen in meinem stillen Daheim ausgeliefert fühle. Es sind viele gegen einen. Ich spüre, daß sie mich anstarren, und ahne Zeichen der Verständigung zwischen ihnen.[130]

Polgar's narrator goes on to describe the relative quiet and stillness of his apartment as like an animal lying in wait, his familiar decorations and furniture as if they were ready to come alive and pounce at any moment. Closing his windows to the street noises below only intensifies the effect, revealing a quiet yet troubling "spider-web of sounds"

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[130] Alfred Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles: Novellen und Skizzen* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1909), pp. 95–105, quoted here pp. 95–96. Polgar's "Die Dinge" also exists in a revised and shortened 1926 version, reprinted in Polgar, *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 2: *Kreislauf*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983), pp. 17–21.

(*Spinnengewebe von Tönen*) suggestive of a hostile, living presence amongst the inanimate things in his room.[131] His anxieties arise most acutely upon hearing noises in the night and when sensing a trace of abruptly silenced commotion upon returning to his apartment. Such animistic anxieties, as Polgar's text makes clear, are not the product of some regressive or childish mentality. Rather, they are predicated upon the narrator's particularly modern living conditions. His "mistrust of things" (*Mißtrauen gegen die Dinge*) is the consequence of his solitary urban existence, the result of being alone and quietly isolated amidst the city's ceaseless commotion and anonymous residents.

In describing the narrator's fears, Polgar's text presents a convergence of experiences that have featured prominently in theoretical accounts of "the uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*) ever since Sigmund Freud's famous 1919 study. First, as the term immediately suggests, there is the experience of *unhomeliness*, which, in Freud's analysis, links what is strange and disturbing to what is secretly and most intimately familiar.[132] In spatial terms, the feelings of anxiety and estrangement particular to the uncanny find their proper place in the domestic enclosures of the home (*das Heim*), a space thus transformed from that of the familiar to the strange, from that of shelter and protection to homelessness and threat.[133] As Martin Heidegger describes it in a 1925 lecture: "Wir sagen dann: *es wird einem unheimlich*. Man ist in der nächstvertrauten

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[131] Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, p. 95.

[132] Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche" [1919], in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 4: *Psychologische Schriften*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1981), pp. 241–74: "Das Unheimliche sei jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längstvertraute zurückgeht" (244).

[133] On aspects of a spatial uncanny in modern architecture and urban space, see Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

Umwelt nicht mehr zu Hause."[134] For Polgar's narrator, the unhomeliness of his urban housing also coincides with a second, more dynamic aspect of the uncanny: an anxious uncertainty as to the *animacy of things*. In Ernst Jentsch's original 1906 description, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," the experience of the uncanny is attributed to this very uncertainty: "Zweifel an der Beseelung eines anscheinend lebendigen Wesens und umgekehrt darüber, ob ein lebloser Gegenstand nicht etwa beseelt sei."[135] While Freud's later analysis is quick to challenge the equation of uncanny feelings with intellectual uncertainty, there is no denying the accuracy of Jentsch's descriptive account.[136] Uncanny sensations indeed arise most forcefully when objects appear to blur the line between animate and inanimate. As Polgar's "Die Dinge" suggests, this anxiety as to the animacy of things finds a particular home in the unhomely, domestic interiors of the modern city.

Polgar was not the only writer to draw a connection between the experiential conditions of urban housing and a fear of objects coming alive. Around the very same

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[134] Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 20, ed. Petra Jaeger (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), p. 400 (italics in original). For Heidegger in the 1920s, any talk of "Unheimlichkeit" would fall under a more fundamental condition of homelessness in the world at large (*Nicht-zuhause-sein*). See also, *Sein und Zeit* [1927] (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), pp. 188–89. As Hubert Dreyfus points out, after 1930 Heidegger moves away from earlier existential accounts of anxiety and uncanniness, and instead interprets such conditions historically, "as a specific response to the rootlessness of the contemporary technological world." Much of Heidegger's later writings can be read as an attempt to reestablish a rootedness and being-at-home in the world through one's mortal "dwelling" (*wohnen*) with things. See Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, *Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 336–38, quoted here, p. 337.

[135] Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.22 (August 25, 1906): pp. 195–98, here p. 197. Jentsch's article is concluded in the following issue, *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.23 (September 1, 1906): pp. 203–205.

[136] Cf. Freud, "Das Unheimliche," pp. 244–45.

time, both Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka composed literary works that transformed their own domestic experiences into fictions of animate things. In Rilke's 1910 novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, the narrator describes the crashing noises of a "certain tin object" (*ein gewisser blecherner Gegenstand*) in his neighbor's apartment and imagines this unruly object to stand in for a whole corrupt and hostile life of things in modern times.[137] In Kafka's 1915 "Blumfeld" fragment, the eponymous bachelor comes home to his apartment to find a pair of rebellious, bouncing celluloid balls, which go about disrupting his otherwise sedate and solitary home-life.[138] With both texts, the fictional account of an uncanny life of things develops out of concrete observations from the authors' experiences in urban housing. In a 1907 letter from Paris, during his work on the *Malte* novel, Rilke describes hearing "irgendwelche blecherne Dinge" that repeatedly crash and roll around on the floor of his neighbor's apartment.[139] Kafka reports in a 1915 journal entry of an, "ewiges Rollen einer Kugel wie beim Kegeln unverständlicher Zweck," heard through the floorboards above his apartment in Prague.[140] As with Polgar's narrator, the noises heard in Rilke's and Kafka's domestic

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[137] See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], in *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 3: *Prosa und Dramen*, ed. August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), pp. 581–84, here p. 582.

[138] See the first half of the fragmentary story (first published posthumously as "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle") in Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1993), pp. 229–52.

[139] See the letter to his wife, "An Clara Rilke, 29, rue Cassette, Paris VI^{e}, am 19. Juni 1907," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1906 bis 1907*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1930), p. 271.

[140] Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), p. 732.

interiors provoke a fear that things might be taking on an autonomous and hostile life of their own.

That Rilke, Kafka, and Polgar would all see fit to explore these anxieties in fictional writings suggests an importance of such episodes for an understanding of both German literary modernism and the experience of urban modernity. The picture is further enriched by contemporaneous developments in early cinema, which began to exploit various trick and animation techniques in order to produce the illusion of autonomously moving objects. Between 1907 and 1912, filmmakers such as James Stuart Blackton, Segundo de Chomón, Émile Cohl, Guido Seeber, and others produced a concentrated number of early trick-films that depict photographed objects—like utensils, tools, furniture, decorations, and commodities—taking on their own animated lives within ostensibly live-action, domestic scenes. The thematic connection alone suggests a surprising historical alignment between representations of modernist literature and cinematic attractions at a time when the relationship between literature and cinema was particularly contentious in aesthetic, cultural, and social debates.[141] Despite perceived competition between the literary arts and the new mass medium of film, these contemporaneous representations of animated things point to a close—and largely unexplored—interrelationship between the two aesthetic media.

In investigating this proliferation of films and literary texts around 1910, the present chapter pursues two distinct but intersecting lines of argumentation. On the one

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[141] See Anton Kaes's introduction to his edited collection, *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1978), pp. 1–35; as well as Thomas Koebner, "Der Film als neue Kunst: Reaktionen der literarischen Intelligenz: Zur Theorie des Stummfilms (1911–24)," in *Literaturwissenschaft, Medienwissenschaft*, ed. Volker Canaris and Helmut Kreuzer (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1977), pp. 1–31.

hand, literary and cinematic depictions of animated things will be commonly situated in relation to broader, modernist discourses on the experiential ruptures and technological conditions of urban modernity as well as the consequent effects on the city-dwelling human. In the first section of the chapter, a close reading of Polgar's "Die Dinge," along with references to Rilke and Kafka, will help to establish the particularly modern, urban-type character, who so fears an animate life of things. In the second section, I will discuss representations of animated objects in early trick-films as they relate to both uncanny experiences of urban modernity as well as modern fantasies and fears of technological automation. In both literature and film, representations of animated things involve an unsettling reflection on the new experiential conditions of modern life—but also differ in important ways given their contrasting, visual and acoustic dimensions. The second line of argumentation investigates representations of animated things in terms of a productive exchange between literature and film around 1910. This particular convergence of literary and cinematic imaginaries, I argue, plays a significant role in shaping both new representational strategies within modernist literature as well as an emerging, film aesthetics based on cinema's unique capability to animate photographed objects. This aesthetic potential of cinema, as I will show, is especially embraced by writers and critics informed by the history of literature and who look to cinematic animation not only as a way of justifying cinema's status as a unique art-form, but also as a means of realizing images that could only be evoked with words in past literary works. Alongside this emergence of a new cinematic aesthetics, literary writers also looked to the animation of objects in early trick-films as an impetus for developing new, representational strategies within modernist and avant-garde literature. The final section of the chapter will discuss

this productive exchange between literature and film, with various textual examples, before concluding with a paired reading of the specific, animated objects in Rilke's *Malte* and Kafka's "Blumfeld" story. Throughout the discussion, the notion of an "urban uncanny" will help provide a unifying frame through which to investigate the animistic experience of things, as it appears in literary and cinematic production around 1910.

My use of the term "animistic" in this context is at once loose and historically informed. By the time Freud's essay, "Animismus, Magie und Allmacht der Gedanken," was published in *Totem und Tabu* (1913), the concept of animism had already been expanded beyond a strict "doctrine of souls" as elaborated by Edward Burnett Tylor and others in the second half of the nineteenth century.[142] While Freud, for example, still holds to the notion of animism as a supposedly primitive "system of thought" (which populates the world with innumerable spirits and animate objects), he also stresses the continuity between the beliefs of non-Western "animists" and the psychology of children and neurotics in modern European societies. Moreover, Freud points to the field of art in modern civilization as retaining aspects of earlier animistic beliefs. In all of these cases, he argues, one finds a similar overvaluation of psychical acts (*Allmacht der Gedanken*), whereby relations between ideas about things are thought to hold for the things themselves.[143] In contrast to Freud, I have little interest in analyzing aesthetic

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[142] For Edward B. Tylor's original interpretation and invention of "Animism" as the groundwork of early religion, see his study, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* [1871], vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010). Tylor's notion of animism was later expanded upon in the ethnographic writings of James George Frazer, Wilhelm Wundt, and others. In the early twentieth century, Tylor's systematic account of animism based on a "doctrine of souls" was subjected to considerable critique and revision by the likes of Freud, Émile Durkheim, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.

representations in terms of projection or the "omnipotence of thoughts." Nor do I intend to read the animated things of modernist fiction and early film as somehow analogous to the magical worlds of "primitive" animism. I use the term animist*ic*, rather, to indicate a particular quality of experience, which (at least in the historical period I investigate) appears strongly related to the uncanny interior spaces of the city and the animated objects of early cinema. In texts from around 1910, these experiences are deemed sufficient in themselves to account for an unsettling anxiety as to the animacy of things and need not be explained in terms of a return of the repressed or surpassed beliefs of the child or "primitive." In short, as I will show, the animistic quality of uncanny experience can be found very readily "at home" in the modern city environment of the early twentieth century.[144]

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[143] See Freud, "Animismus, Magie und Allmacht der Gedanken" [1913], in *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), pp. 125–50. In Freud's later 1919 essay, "Das Unheimliche," the term "*animistisch*" is extracted even further from its original ethnographic context to apply to aesthetic experience and the depicted worlds of literary texts. While Freud makes no direct reference to cinema in this context, Stefan Andriopoulos points out that his German formulation "*Technik der Magie*" (in paraphrase of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss's *General Theory of Magic*) "simultaneously invokes cinema as a modern 'technology of magic.'" See Andriopoulos, "The Terror of Reproduction: Early Cinema's Ghostly Doubles and the Right to One's Own Image," *New German Critique* 99 (Fall 2006): pp. 151–70, quoted here, p. 166. Freud's 1919 phrase refers back to a related formulation in *Totem und Tabu*. Cf. "Das Unheimliche," p. 263.

[144] For a relevant attempt at defining a modern uncanny at the intersection of urban phantasmagoria and technological media, see also the introduction and essays collected in Jo Collins and John Jervis (eds.), *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). It is telling that, in Polgar's text, the narrator's attempt to justify his "mistrust of things" should draw on a supposed "Tradition" belonging not to the non-Western "primitive" but rather to the culture and philosophy of 19th century Europe. See Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, p. 97. The narrator refers to the animate objects in Hans Christian Andersen's popular fairy tales (p. 103), the turning tables of the spiritualist séance (p. 99), and even German Idealism with its tenet, "daß nur in uns als bemerkenden Subjekten die Dinge existent seien," making one all the more wary what these "philosophisch entkernte Dinge" might be up to when out of our sights (p. 98).

Focusing on this collection of texts and films from around 1910 has the added benefit of challenging a number of assumptions that hold sway in current critical discussions of the uncanny. First, following Freud's famous reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann," there has been a strong tendency to overvalue an exclusively visual realm of uncanny experience, to stress only the uncanny effects of optical instruments and media, or objects whose *visible* appearance seems to blur the lines between human and thing.[145] My analysis will seek to complicate this picture by resituating the uncanny in relation to an *isolation* and *interference* of the senses—hearing and seeing, in particular—which appears in the literary texts I discuss and emerges forcefully through a direct comparison between these works and contemporaneous, cinematic representations of animate things. By situating such representations historically with respect to modernist discourses on urban experience, one can also avoid falling into older arguments about literary genre, which would seek to fit these uncanny fictions into a lineage with fantastic tales from the nineteenth century.[146] Of interest is not some destabilization or blurring of the familiar and supernatural, leaving characters or readers uncertain as to the true state of things. Polgar's narrator and Rilke's Malte are clearly suffering from some sort of psychological anxiety; and the animated things in Kafka's "Blumfeld" and early animation films are presented as bizarre, yet self-evident matters of fact. These are not instances of representational uncertainty, I would argue, but rather

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[145] For a delineation of a strictly visual uncanny, see Tom Gunning, "Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny," in *Uncanny Modernity*, pp. 68–90.

[146] The study of the uncanny as a literary genre can be attributed largely to the influence of Tzvetan Todorov's classic 1970 study, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975).

complimentary aspects of the same historical reflection on an uncanny, new relationship between humans and things in the early twentieth century. The close alignment between literary and cinematic representations in this manner also helps to counter deterministic arguments such as Friedrich Kittler's, which describe the uncanny dying out in literature just as it is resurrected in film.[147] On the contrary, as I will show, this specific instance of the uncanny emerges around 1910 at the historical intersection of modernist fiction, cinematic animation, and imaginaries of the modern city.

Nerves and Noises

Whether in Rilke's Paris, Kafka's Prague, or Polgar's Vienna, a set of common features describes the character of one threatened by an apparently hostile, independent life of things. Beyond being a solitary and male city-dweller, such a figure is found to suffer from a specifically modern, yet famously vague malady: that of sensitive nerves.[148] Kafka describes laying down, "mit förmlich zerrissenen Nerven," after a particularly tormenting day in his noisy apartment.[149] Rilke complains of a sensitivity to noises heard through his

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[147] See Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon Film Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986), pp. 229–30; and Kittler, *Optische Medien: Berliner Vorlesung 1999* (Berlin: Merve, 2002), p. 227: "Die Theorie Tzvetan Todorovs, es sei die literarische Phantastik an ihrer Aufklärung durch Freud und die Psychoanalyse gestorben, ist zur Hälfte falsch: Das Phantastische erlebte im Spielfilm eine triumphale Auferstehung."

[148] As Andreas Killen puts it in a recent study, nervousness is the "quintessentially modern condition," which by 1900 had taken on the character of a mass phenomenon. To be nervous, "meant to live in a sped-up world, one saturated with new stimuli, demands, risks, messages, and pleasures, requiring constant adaptation to a wealth of new experiences." See Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shocks, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006), p. 1.

[149] Kafka, *Tagebücher*, p. 733.

interior walls and of his neighbor's own hopeless "nervous" (*nervös*) condition.[150] In Polgar's text, the "Nervenkrisen" and "Nervenstruktur" responsible for the narrator's anxieties are even given a specific medical diagnosis. His animistic fear of things is attributed to a case of "Neurasthenikerdasein."[151]

In referring to the "neurasthenic" (*Neurastheniker*), Polgar's text links its narrator's anxieties to a specific, historical disease construct. First introduced around 1870, neurasthenia was invented to encompass a range of nervous conditions supposedly brought on by the effects of rapid industrialization, modern media technologies, and the occupational hazards of mental overexertion. By 1900, the nervous illness had become gradually expanded beyond its original associations with the over-stimulated upper classes to describe a mass nervousness that cut across class and gender lines and was most strongly located in the rapidly modernizing urban-centers of America and Western Europe.[152] The perceived mass nervousness of city-dwellers, according to popular and

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[150] Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1906 bis 1907*, p. 271.

[151] For the above quotations, see Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, pp. 100, 104, and 102, respectively.

[152] For a concise account of both the clinical and discursive history of neurasthenia, see Killen, *Berlin Electropolis*, pp. 1–14 and 49–52. Here, he provides a helpful summary of George Miller Beard's original 1869 study, *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion*, which first introduced the term neurasthenia: "'Civilization excites,' [Beard] wrote; and the higher classes were correspondingly more excited. Modern nervousness […] was attributable to the impact on modern life of five factors: steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the growth of the sciences, and the increased 'mental activity' of women. Above all nervousness was the result of mental overexertion, the occupational hazard of a new class of brain workers, men whose vocation demanded prolonged concentration amid conditions of 'considerable excitement,' such as politics or commercial activity" (p. 51). Translated editions of Beard's study proved a considerable influence on French and German medical and sociological discussions in the late 19th century. For the 2nd German edition, see George M. Beard, *Die Nervenschwäche (Neurasthenia), ihre Symptome, Natur, Folgezustände und Behandlung*, trans. M. Neisser (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1883).

medical discussions of the time, was largely attributable to the multiplication and intensification of stimuli that had come to characterize urban life. Within this context, Georg Simmel's famous account of the metropolitan type in his 1903 essay, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," remains only the best-known articulation of the psychological conditions of urban modernity understood as a "Steigerung des Nervenlebens."[153] In short, by the time of Polgar's writing, the complex of nervous disorders covered by the term neurasthenia had become inextricably tied to the excessive shocks and intrusions of urban modernity on the mental and physical life of the city-dweller.

The insight of literary writers like Polgar, Rilke, and Kafka was that these states of nervous anxiety were not only triggered by the increased stimulation and disruptive shocks to be expected in the public, exterior spaces of the city. The general nervousness of urban life could also transform the relatively peaceful and supposedly protective spaces of the domestic interior into an uncanny and threatening site. In 1897 Émile Durkheim could suggest that the neurasthenic, "may live with a minimum of suffering when he can live in retirement and create a special environment, only partially accessible to the outer tumult; thus he sometimes is seen to flee the world which makes him ill and to seek solitude. But if forced to enter the melée and unable to shelter his tender sensitivity from outer shocks, he is likely to suffer more pain."[154] For Polgar's narrator,

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[153] See Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben" [1903], in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen, 1901–1908*, vol. 1, ed. Rüdiger Kramme et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 116–131, here p. 116.

[154] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* [1897], trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), p. 68.

however, even the quiet "solitude" (*Einsamkeit*) of one's own apartment is accompanied by a severe nervous anxiety. As the famous opening pages of Rilke's *Malte* show, there is of course the perpetual threat of violent breakdown between interior and exterior, inner and outer, with the disruptive noises of the street penetrating into the interior spaces of the home and body.[155] Yet even with the windows closed, with a degree of protection from the "disquiet of the streets" (*Unruhe der Straße*), Polgar's neurasthenic is still delivered over to countless, unidentifiable noises, which he amplifies and transforms in his mind into a fearful fantasy of hostile, animate things. At stake is thus not only the *breakdown* between inner and outer, but also an uncanny *inversion*: between the bare, threatening life of the streets and an otherwise protected, interior life of the home. While Walter Benjamin's flâneur might make an interior dwelling out of the city's busy streets and crowds, the flipside is an urban, domestic interior deprived of comfort and in which a no less dynamic and threatening life appears to have awakened.[156] Benjamin's further description of the "uncanny" aspects (*das Unheimliche*) of the urban phantasmagoria and crowds finds its counterpart in a phantasmal host of animate furniture, utensils, and domestic trappings in the unhomely apartment.[157] Within this urban environment of general nervousness, Polgar's text therefore offers an alternative remedy: "Ach, schickt

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[155] See Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 455: "Daß ich es nicht lassen kann, bei offenem Fenster zu schlafen. Elektrische Bahnen rasen läutend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin."

[156] Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire" [1938], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 539: "Die Straße wird zur Wohnung für den Flaneur, der zwischen Häuserfronten so wie der Bürger in seinen vier Wänden zuhause ist."

[157] See Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" [1940], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, p. 629.

den Neurastheniker nicht in die Einsamkeit und verschafft ihm nicht 'Ruhe!' Das heißt, ihn von dem gewöhnlichen Krawall der Dinge befreien, um ihn ihrem weit qualvolleren heimlichen Lärm auszuliefern. Wo ist die Einsamkeit des Neurasthenikers? Im Caféhaus!"[158]

The big-city setting of these literary episodes already indicates the modernity of the animistic anxieties described by Polgar, Rilke, and Kafka. The mental constitution of the relevant literary figures only reinforces the point. Rilke's Malte, Kafka's Blumfeld, and Polgar's neurasthenic are neither childish nor superstitious, but rather exceedingly rational. In fact, it is their rational disposition and observations that structure their fearful relationship with an apparent life of things. Kafka learns from his landlady that the room above him is unoccupied, and is thus led to "logically negate the existence of the noise" (*den Lärm logisch zu negieren*); however, with no possible human agency behind this "Illusion eines Kegelspiels" heard through the ceiling, he is left to attribute the noise to some autonomous, thingly "Lärmapparat."[159] For Polgar's neurasthenic, a similar inability to establish a "causal connection" (*kausale Verknüpfung*) between sound and source is what drives him to a fearful mistrust of things. The effect on his nerves of the soft rustling, rattling, and creaking of objects in his room cannot be combatted with a dose of "Menschenverstand." Instead, his attempt to establish a logical "Allianz zwischen Ursache und Wirkung" leads to frustration and a further crisis of nerves. The constant, futile attempt to fit all thingly noises into a "Schlinge eines logischen Zusammenhanges"

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[158] Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, p. 105.

[159] See Kafka's letter from March 21, 1915, cited in Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I: Apparatband*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1993), p. 76.

only strengthens the narrator's anxieties that his domestic objects are in possession of their own animate life.[160]

In all of these literary examples, the intellectual uncertainty that gives rise to uncanny fears is thus closely related to the material conditions of urban living. Alone in an apartment, the city-dweller is subjected to frequently unlocalizable and unidentifiable noises, whether emanating from outside of the building or through the walls of adjacent rooms. Tight quarters and thin walls combine with the intensification and closer proximity of noises in the city to create a disquieting separation between what is seen and what is heard. In Simmel's and Benjamin's more famous accounts, the unsettling aspect of urban experience is attributed to a supposed, "Übergewicht der Aktivität des Auges über die des Gehörs," occurring in crowded spaces of public transit where people look at one another without speaking.[161] A more accurate picture arises, however, when considering both public and private spaces of the city. Urban experience is not simply characterized by the predominance of one sense over the others, but rather in their mutual

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[160] For the above quotations, see Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, pp. 96 and 99–100. Here is perhaps the pathological flipside to the rational, mental life of Simmel's metropolitan character. In the absence of a multiplicity and intensity of stimuli, the urban type in Polgar's story attempts to rationally process and organize even the most insignificant stimuli to the point of nervous exhaustion.

[161] See Benjamin, "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire" [1938], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, p. 540. The above quotation is from a longer passage reverse-translated by Benjamin from a 1912 French translation of Simmel. The original text can be found in Simmel's 1908 study, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* and is reprinted in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.3, p. 1211: "der, der sieht, ohne zu hören, [ist] sehr viel verworrener, ratloser, beunruhigter als der, der hört, ohne zu sehen. Hierin muß ein für die Soziologie der Großstadt bedeutsames Moment liegen. Der Verkehr in ihr, verglichen mit dem in der Kleinstadt, zeigt ein unermeßliches *Übergewicht des Sehens über das Hören* Andrer [...]. Vor der Ausbildung der Omnibusse, Eisenbahnen und Straßenbahnen im 19. Jahrhundert waren Menschen überhaupt nicht in der Lage, sich minuten- bis stundenlang anblicken zu können oder zu müssen, ohne miteinander zu sprechen" (emphasis added).

separation and isolation.[162] The visual experience of the streets establishes the city as a dynamic, overpopulated space of moving bodies, spectacles, objects, and machines. An awareness of this ubiquitous life persists even in the isolated confines of the urban apartment, yet here it is experienced primarily through sound. The inability to establish a firm connection between what is heard and its cause can provoke an uncanny relationship to all the surrounding, urban life. So when noises begin to emanate from within the apartment itself, a city-dweller like Polgar's neurasthenic might be excused a certain fear that a similarly dynamic life has awakened within his very own home.[163]

Around the same time as Polgar's writing, Ernst Jentsch would also point to a separation of the senses as a key component of uncanny sensations: "das Ausfallen einer wichtigen Sinnesfunction kann solche Gefühle im Menschen stark steigern," he writes of

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[162] The isolation and conditioning of the senses around 1900, of course, involves far more than the experiential conditions of the city. As Jonathan Crary has argued, modernity involves a broad reshaping of human perception according to new norms and practices of attention that emerged historically in relation to discursive and technological forms of control and rationalization. See Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). For a detailed study of the historical interrelations between the acoustic experiences of urban modernity, scientific studies of hearing, and German modernist literature, see the forthcoming work of Tyler Whitney.

[163] The connection between acoustic experience and animism is of course not unique to the soundscape of the modern city. As presented in the innovative work of Spyros Papapetros, nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts of animism, like Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, frequently "situate the origin of animistic beliefs in auditory effects of inanimate objects." See Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 17. In regard to Papapetros's larger project, the point of the present chapter is simply to offer further evidence of the infusion of animistic thinking in the modernist culture of turn-of-the-century Europe. Animistic anxieties arising in relation to the material conditions of urban dwelling present yet another case of what Papapetros terms "phobic animation": the experience of a "hostile external environment" of living things, which describes far better the modern, technological environments of the Western world than the natural, "primitive" world to which it was originally ascribed (pp. 20–21).

the uncanny in 1906.[164] Jentsch offers examples of a loss of vision at night or the breakdown of intelligible hearing in a noisy "Werkstätte oder Maschinenhalle." In both cases, a breakdown of one sense in relation to another—hearing without being able to see, seeing without meaningful hearing—contributes to an experience of uncanny disorientation. For a particularly telling example, Jentsch also resorts to the realm of fantasy: "Ab und zu liest man in älteren Reisebeschreibungen, jemand habe sich im Urwalde auf einen Baumstamm gesetzt und plötzlich habe sich dieser Baumstamm zum Entsetzen des Reisenden zu bewegen angefangen und als eine Riesenschlange herausgestellt."[165] Here, the separation and interference between what one sees and what one feels gives rise to the uncanny realization of an animate being. In this world of fantasy evoked by Jentsch, such animate creatures and things are an accepted, external reality. For the modern city-dweller like Polgar's narrator, however, a similar uncanny encounter is a matter of an internal fantasy of the mind—the turning of untraceable sounds into phantasmal, animate things. What is missing in Jentsch's description of the uncanny is to bring together—under the sign of the modern—this fragmentation and interference of the senses with what he calls the "allgemein nervöse Veranlagung" of the individual.[166] Under these conditions, located most strongly in the modern urban environment, even the metropolis can appear like a fantastic, enchanted realm. Thus, for Polgar's neurasthenic, everyday life can seem like a walk through a mysterious *Urwald*:

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[164] Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.22, p. 197.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid.

> überall mysteriöse Lebendigkeit; das Gefühl, von unsichtbaren Händen betastet, vom Atem geheimnisvoller Wesen gestreift zu werden; böse Laute, die wie gefährliche Tiere plötzlich über den Weg springen; trübes Licht, das nicht Licht zu sein scheint, sondern das blinzelnde Auge der Finsternis. Nun, das Leben des Neurasthenikers ist ein beständiger Gang durch solch dunkles Waldinnere. Das Lebendige ist für ihn überlebendig, das Tote regt sich, das Lautlose bekommt Stimme, der Schatten Körper, die Dinge Persönlichkeit.[167]

Object Animations

The psychological anxieties described in Polgar's "Die Dinge" find a direct, experiential counterpart in the visual representations of early cinema. Whereas literary modernism imagines a phantasmal life of things out of the untraceable noises of the city, early films were understood to exhibit such possibilities as a visual reality. Insofar as early cinema presented the viewer with a fleeting, fragmentary series of scenes, shocks, and attractions, the emerging mass medium was already well correlated with the general nervousness and intensified experiences of the big city. As one writer observed in 1911:

> Die Psychologie des kinematographischen Triumphes ist Großstadt-Psychologie. Nicht nur, weil die große Stadt den natürlichen Brennpunkt für alle Ausstrahlungen des gesellschaftlichen Lebens bildet, im besonderen auch noch, weil die Großstadtseele, diese ewig gehetzte, von flüchtigem Eindruck zu flüchtigem Eindruck taumelnde, neugierige und unergründliche Seele so recht die Kinematographenseele ist.[168]

The city-dweller's specific anxieties as to an unseen, animate life of things, as described in literary texts around 1910, provides a striking instance of this historical connection between early cinema and the metropolitan psyche. The fraught psychological interiors of Polgar's neurasthenic or Rilke's Malte find themselves reinforced externally in the visual

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[167] Polgar, "Die Dinge," in *Bewegung ist alles*, p. 104.

[168] Hermann Kienzl, "Theater und Kinematograph," *Der Strom* 1.7 (October 1911): pp. 219–21, quoted here, pp. 219–20. Also quoted in Kaes, *Kino-Debatte*, p. 6.

culture of early cinema (located as well in the big-city environment). Between roughly 1907 and 1912, urban filmgoers encountered a considerable proliferation of animated trick-films in which real domestic objects were observed to move on their own. Tables appeared to set themselves, tools performed manual labor without the aid of human hands, and whole collections of furniture and domestic objects would pack themselves up and move from apartment to apartment. While the uncanny sensation produced by such images was in the service of mass entertainment, such films were also closely bound up with the fears and fantasies of the modern, technological environment of the city. The total automatization of objects as presented in early cinema was both a dream of futuristic luxury and a nightmare of an unpredictable and uncontrollable world of things. New techniques of animation provided an intensified vision of this changed relationship with things, which was already inherent to the experiences of the modern city and the moving images of early film.

For a young Georg Lukács, cinematic animation suggested the possibility of a new, film aesthetics that could transcend the limitations of literary representation. In his short 1911 article "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kinos," Lukács based his speculations "toward an aesthetics of cinema" on the "fantastic" (*phantastisch*) new life of humans and things on the screen. In contrast to the mortal "presence" (*Gegenwart*) or "being" (*Dasein*) of the theatrical actor on stage, he argues, cinematic pictures granted to both human actors and inanimate objects a qualitatively different kind of life: "ein Leben ohne Gegenwärtigkeit, ein Leben ohne Schicksal, ohne Gründe, ohne Motive; ein Leben, mit dem das Innerste unserer Seele nie identisch werden will, noch kann."[169] According

to Lukács, this new cinematic life was freed from the causality and meaningful, temporal progression of the theatrical arts. It existed instead in a realm of infinite possibility and open temporal succession: a world in which the very distinction between "possibility" and "reality" was nullified through the "empirical reality" of the cinematic image.[170] Even things could be granted a fantastic, animate life on the screen. The essay describes films of animated furniture, up-side-down images showing mysterious crawling forms, and reverse-motion projections in which smoking cigars grew longer and humans sprang back to life out from under the wheels of a racing car. Referring specifically to early-nineteenth-century writers like Hoffmann, Poe, and Achim von Arnim, Lukács speculates that cinema could directly realize the type of animate worlds only imagined in Romantic literature: "äußerste, ungehemmteste Beweglichkeit der Gestalten, das völlige Lebendigwerden des Hintergrundes, der Natur und der Interieurs."[171]

In light of Lukács's claims about film, Polgar's appeal to the Romantic trope of the enchanted forest appears then not only as a reference to an earlier literary tradition. It also corresponds historically to a particular reception of film. Linked by their common, anachronistic references to the uncanniness of Romanticism, the animate things of Polgar's story and Lukács's film aesthetics appear rather as mutually reinforcing aspects

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[169] Lukács's essay was first published as, "Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des 'Kino,'" in the German-language newspaper published in Budapest, *Pester Lloyd* 90 (April 16, 1911): pp. 45–46. I quote here from the later, slightly modified version of the essay published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (Sept. 10, 1913) and reprinted in Kaes (ed.), *Kino-Debatte*, pp. 112–18, quoted above, p. 113.

[170] Ibid., p. 114: "*'Alles ist möglich'*: das ist die Weltanschauung des 'Kino,' und weil seine Technik in jedem einzelnen Moment die absolute (wenn auch nur empirische) Wirklichkeit dieses Moments ausdrückt, wird das Gelten der 'Möglichkeit' als eine der 'Wirklichkeit' entgegen-gesetzten Kategorie aufgehoben; die beiden Kategorien werden einander gleichgesetzt, sie werden zu einer Identität."

[171] Ibid., p. 115–17, here p. 115.

of a new, modernist uncanny: an animistic experience of the world resituated in relation to the anxious interiority of the urban dweller, on the one hand, and the new, visual possibilities of the cinematic image, on the other. Taken together, Polgar's and Lukács's texts suggest that the earlier, psychological phantasms of Romantic literature find a popular approximation in the daily experiences of urban housing and cinematic entertainment in the early twentieth century. But whereas literature could only evoke the kind of animistic anxieties arising through the acoustic experience of the city, film offered a direct, visual equivalent to the feared animation of things. The early, German description of cinema as "living pictures" (*lebende Bilder*) already points to a certain animistic quality of the emerging, mass medium itself. This understanding of cinema is only intensified with the specific use of trick-techniques to animate individual objects depicted on screen.

The understanding of cinema as a medium based in animation emerged early on in its history. German advertisements and publications addressing the earliest public exhibitions in the mid 1890s referred to cinema as both "*lebende Bilder*" and "*lebende Photographien*."[172] Here, the German closely paralleled comparable English and French descriptions of cinema as "animated photography" and "*photographies animées*." While all phrases nicely evoke the impression of life found in the moving images of cinema in general, the term *animation* eventually took on a set of more specific meanings in French

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[172] The term "*lebende Bilder*" for cinema also evokes an earlier usage in reference to the nineteenth-century entertainment form of the *tableau vivant*, which reproduced static, painterly compositions through the use of real costumed actors, both professional and amateur. On the short-lived historical intersection between early cinema and public *tableau vivant* exhibitions, see Daniel Wiegand, "Stillstand im Bewegungsbild: Intermediale Beziehungen zwischen Film und Tableaux vivants um 1900," *Montage AV: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation* 20.2 (Feb. 20, 2011): pp. 41–53.

and English. In Frederick A. Talbot's popular 1912 book, *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked*, for example, film is not only referred to as "animated photography"; the author also gives detailed accounts of various trick techniques that were "means of imparting animation to a lifeless object."[173] By around 1910, "animation" in English thus referred at once to both specific techniques for making objects appear to live and move on their own as well as to the moving images of the cinematic medium itself. It was not until around 1920 that the term took on its now more familiar meaning as a designation for the specific film genre of cartoons or animated drawings (in French, *dessins animés*).[174] In early-twentieth-century German usage, variations on the words "to live" (*leben*) and "to enliven" (*beleben*) frequently appeared to describe the animating effects of cinematic techniques as well as the moving image itself. However, in distinction to English and French, it was not until after WWII that the term "*Animation*" was consistently borrowed in German to designate the film genre of animated drawings or cartoons.[175] Instead, during the early decades of the twentieth century, the German

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[173] For his extensive discussion of early trick and animation techniques, see Frederick A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), pp. 197–263, quoted here, p. 209. Talbot's introductory discussion of cinematic illusion is titled, "What Is Animated Photography?" (pp. 1–9).

[174] The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1919 as the earliest instance of "animation" referring to films made up of a series of drawings. In Le Robert's *Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française*, the earliest date for "*dessin animé*" is listed as 1916. This shift in usage of the word "animation" occurring between roughly 1915 and 1920 is consistent with primary texts documented in Donald Crafton's study of early cartoon animation. See, for example, his book, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

[175] Cf. early German publications on such films, listed in Jeanpaul Goergen, *Bibliographie zum deutschen Animationsfilm* (Berlin: CineGraph Babelsberg, 2002), pp. 14–19. In the early 20th century, the verb "*animieren*" (long borrowed from the Latin to describe the breath or granting of life) was used instead to refer to forms of social entertainment and prostitution as in the words "*Animierkneipe*" and "*Animierdame*."

term "*Trickfilm*" served as a broad designation for both cartoon animation as well as photographically based films that were largely non-narrative and dominated by trick techniques. In what follows, I have little interest in delimiting what constitutes the animation or trick-film genre. Instead, my use of the term "animation" refers mainly to the cinematic trick-techniques used to bring objects to life in early cinema.

Of particular importance is the cinematic technique referred to in Talbot's *Moving Pictures* as "one turn one picture" movement.[176] Better known today as "stop-motion animation" or sometimes "object animation" (*Sachanimation*), the technique involves the tedious process of slightly repositioning real, three-dimensional objects between single-frame exposures, so that, when projected, the inanimate objects appear to move on their own.[177] While this technical possibility was well known from the very beginning of film history (based as it was on the most elementary principle of cinematic illusion), it was not until around 1910 that it became a more prevalent feature of commercial production. Beginning around 1907, an international collection of filmmakers, including James Stuart Blackton, Segundo de Chomón, Émile Cohl, and Guido Seeber began to experiment more intensively with this particular technique of single-frame or frame-by-frame animation.

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[176] See Talbot's discussion of the technique in *Moving Pictures*, pp. 235–40.

[177] For a current, German-language account of "object animation" (*Sachanimation*) in the early history of cinema, see, for example, Annika Schoemann, *Der deutsche Animationsfilm: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart 1909–2001* (Sankt Augustin: Gardez!, 2003), pp. 30–32. In his popular 1927 book on cinematic tricks, pioneering German cameraman Guido Seeber refers to the technique simply as a trick of "single-frame exposures" (*Einzelbild-Aufnahme*). See his, *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten: Eine praktische und theoretische Darstellung der photographischen Filmtricks* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1927), pp. 18–19 and 159. On the technique, Seeber writes: "Besonders diese Art der Filmaufnahme, die des 'Einzelbildes,' gestattet die größten und verblüffendsten Wirkungen. Jeden beliebigen Gegenstand kann man so im Film beleben, indem man seine Lage nach der Aufnahme jedes Einzelbildes verändert und entsprechend seiner Natur einrichtet. Pinsel oder Stifte schreiben selbst, Werkzeuge verrichten ihre Arbeit allein, Möbel wandern von Ort zu Ort" (p. 18).

Figure 2.1. James Stuart Blackton. *The Haunted Hotel*, 1907. Film stills.

With a stationary camera and a stable background setting, filmmakers were able to visually animate real, photographed objects in what appeared to be live-action sequences and scenes. If incremental changes in the positioning of objects were subtle and fluid enough, playing back the filmstrip would produce the eerie illusion of an object moving on its own without any evidence of human manipulation. With the help of invisible wires or reverse motion, everyday objects could even appear to levitate, jump, or flip over as if

exhibiting their own lively personalities or suggesting the malevolent work of some invisible, ghostly presence.

This early animation of objects was also limited in that it could never synthesize a purely naturalistic movement of things. No matter how careful the repositioning of objects between frames, the animation would appear slightly jerky and mechanical, leaving the viewer in a state of uneasy awareness of the apparatus behind the illusion of (not quite) continuous motion. As Talbot himself states: "The interruption in exposure can often be detected unless the task is carried out with consummate skill, because the movement appears to be jerky in the picture."[178] One consequence of this technical challenge was, as Talbot notes, a "somewhat uncanny" effect, which could be intensified through the coordinated use of additional trick techniques like invisible wires and slow, fast, or reverse motion.[179]

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[178] Ibid., p. 237.

[179] Ibid., p. 239. It should be noted here that Talbot also uses the term "stop motion" as an alternative to "one turn one picture" movement (p. 235). This usage and the current term "stop-motion animation" must be distinguished, however, from the "stop motion" or "stop-motion substitution" technique frequently discussed by scholars of early cinema. In reference to the earlier work of Georges Méliès, for example, "stop motion" refers not to longer, animation sequences but rather to isolated, substitution tricks that were popular before 1907. For early tricks of stop-motion substitution, filmmakers would supposedly stop the camera at a designated point in a live-action sequence, rearrange actors and props, and then resume turning the camera. In this manner, films could create the illusion of humans and things suddenly appearing, disappearing, transforming, or relocating as if out of thin air. Talbot preserves this earlier usage of "stop motion," as well, in his broader discussion of trick techniques (see pp. 201 and 212–15). As Tom Gunning has argued, such illusions were often times far more complex and could also involve the cutting and splicing of film. See Gunning, "'Primitive' Cinema: A Frame-up? Or, The Trick's on Us," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 95–103. To avoid confusion, I prefer the term "object animation," which has the added benefit of broadly including other trick techniques like invisible wires and reverse motion, which were often used in conjunction with the "one turn one picture" technique.

The very earliest films to suggest an animation of things often fell within the familiar genre of the haunted house film. In Edison productions, like *Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel* (1900), and numerous trick-films by Georges Méliès, including *Le Manoir du diable* (1896), *Le Château hanté* (1897), and *L'Auberge du bon repos* (1903), the gothic setting of the haunted house, castle, or hotel was used as a stage for an array of substitution tricks that created the illusion of ghosts, demons, and household objects suddenly appearing and disappearing, and of painted portraits that appeared to come alive (the painted image suddenly replaced by a human actor). It was not until about 1907, however, that a significant number of films began to exploit stop-motion animation techniques to create the illusion of real objects moving on their own.[180] The first of such films, like Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* (figure 2.1) and Chomón's *La Maison hantée*, both from around 1907, added longer object-animation sequences to the familiar repertoire of haunted house stop-tricks.[181] Following a highly successful run of screenings of *The Haunted House* in Paris during the summer of 1907 (billed as *L'Hôtel*

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[180] Even later trick-films like Méliès's *Le Diable noir* (1905) and Edwin S. Porter's *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906) do not yet contain more seamless object animation. Both films (Porter's being the likely reference for the moving furniture described by Lukács) instead use a rough series of isolated stop-tricks to create the illusion of furniture appearing, disappearing, and leaping around a room.

[181] According to historian of early animation Donald Crafton, J. Stuart Blackton's *The Haunted Hotel* (1907) was the first commercially successful film to exploit the technique of object animation. See Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898–1928* [1982] (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 13–33; and his monograph on the early French animation, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film*, pp. 125–138. In Crafton's account, the object animation of Chomón, Cohl, and others developed only after Blackton's initial commercial success. The dates of Chomón's early object-animation films are uncertain however. For a tentative filmography, which places *La Maison hantée* in 1906, see Joan M. Minguet Batllori, *Segundo de Chomón: The Cinema of Fascination* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Institut Català de les Indústries Culturals, 2010).

hanté: fantasmagorie épouvantable), a staff writer for the French weekly *L'Illustration*, Gustave Babin, described for his readers the mysterious attractions of object animation:

> All *amateurs* and *habitués* of the cinema who know its repertoire have seen those mysterious scenes I mean: a table loaded with food which is consumed, no one knows how, by some invisible being […]. A bottle pours its own wine into a glass, a knife hurls itself onto a loaf of bread, then slices into a sausage; a wicker basket weaving itself; tools performing their work without the cooperation of any artisan. So many strange marvels that one could see every night for several months. And even tipped off as I was, and as my readers are, I still could not find the last word of the riddle.[182]

The underlying attraction of such scenes, as Babin emphasizes, was the opportunity to observe the illusion of animation over longer periods of time (even repeatedly) with a sustained uncertainty as to the underlying mechanism. With the usual cinematic illusion of continuous motion (cinema itself being a form of animation), the workings of the apparatus remained imperceptible to the human eye. However, with the jerky and intermittent movements of object animation, the mechanical operation of cinema was foregrounded for the viewer in an uncanny manner. A fantastical, photographic representation of the animate thing was thus inseparable from an uneasy sensation of the automatic mechanism of the cinematic apparatus itself. As early German animator Guido Seeber would later emphasize: "Trick heißt ja nicht Täuschung des Publikums, sondern eine Sichtbarmachung der Phantastik des Films."[183]

The dual status of cinema as both a photographic and animating medium corresponds to distinct aspects of the uncanny as discussed by Freud and Jentsch. Drawing on Freud's 1919 text, scholars like Tom Gunning and Stefan Andriopoulos have

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[182] Gustave Babin, "Les Coulisses du cinématographe," *L'Illustration* (April 4, 1908), translated and quoted in Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 17.

[183] Seeber, *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten*, p. 127.

convincingly stressed the role of ghostly doubles in early cinema.[184] In their readings of early film, it is cinema's status as a photographic medium that constitutes its uncanny effect. The moving image's ability to provide ghostly traces or copies of the human—through tricks of double exposure and split screen—linked the new medium historically to Western anxieties about spectral images (Gunning) and the legal right to one's own image (Andriopoulos). Here, the animistic anxieties related to film had to do with the photographic image's supposed capability to document or embody the immaterial soul of the human. As Andriopoulos points out, Edward B. Tylor's original 1871 definition of the soul in animistic belief—as "a thin insubstantial human image […] a sort of vapour, film, or shadow"—already invokes the contemporaneous, visual medium of photography.[185] When considering cinema as an animating medium, however, the uncanny is configured somewhat differently and tends (perhaps counter-intuitively) to suspend or at least problematize concerns over an animating spirit or soul of the moving image. As Lukács remarks in 1911, the animated life of humans and things on film is also: "ein Leben ohne Seele."[186]

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[184] See Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995), pp. 42–71; and Stefan Andriopoulos, "The Terror of Reproduction: Early Cinema's Ghostly Doubles and the Right to One's Own Image."

[185] See Andriopoulos, "The Terror of Reproduction," p. 158 nt. 29. Following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he notes here that, "'film' is employed to describe a 'copy' of a photographic plate as early as 1845." For the above quotation from Tylor, see *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* [1871], vol. 1, 4th ed. (London: J. Murray, 1903), p. 429.

[186] Lukács, "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kinos," p. 114.

Instead of Freud's ghostly doubles, early animation films evoke the uncanny as a blurring of boundaries between animate and inanimate, organic life and mechanical movement, aligning the cinematic uncanny more with Jentsch's 1906 description.[187] While Jentsch avoids any mention of cinema, his connection between uncanny sensations and an uncertainty as to the animacy of things corresponds strikingly well to the experience of early object-animation films, which appeared around the very same time as his writing. Ironically, his description of the psychological terror of the uncanny comes at a time when such sensations were first being popularized as mass visual entertainment. With object animation, cinema could simulate for its early audiences the same sensations of Jentsch's uncanny, producing in the viewer a related uncertainty as to the cause of animate movements. Early cinema audiences were not naïve, of course. Whether they could discern the exact technique behind the animation or not, they were still very much at home with the illusion and could experience it as a captivating if somewhat disquieting pleasure. The very attraction of object animation rested (and continues to rest) in the uneasy sensation it creates of the mechanical apparatus behind the illusion. The uncanny effect of the technique thus has less to do with the suggestion of an animating spirit or soul of things. Rather, the strange attraction of object animation can be attributed to the uncanny tension that arises between the sensation of mechanical movement and a semblance of animate life.

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[187] For a similar distinction between the uncanny of Freud and Jentsch in relation to early cinema, see Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 46: "If the contemporary response to Lumière films aligns them on the side of Freud's ghostly uncanny, Méliès transfers to cinema many characteristic attributes of Jentsch's uncanny, exploiting technological novelty as well as the cinema's ability to blur the boundary between the animate and inanimate with trick photography."

As Vivian Sobchack has recently summarized, the term *animation* already contains an inner tension that accounts for this vexed and double meaning. According to a more long-standing definition originating in the Latin, "animation" is defined as the presence or divine granting of an animating spirit, *anima*, the vital principle or soul of living things. In more recent nineteenth-century usage, this definition is complicated and expanded to include the state of mere *motion* (as a sign of life) and the suggestion that even humans are capable of granting "life" to inanimate matter (through the creation of self-moving, technological entities, for example). Since the nineteenth century, animation is never without this tension between animateness as the presence of a true animating spirit and animateness as the mere state of self-propelled, mechanical movement.[188] As Frederick A. Talbot succinctly notes in 1912, this ambivalent status of animation is at the very heart of cinematic illusion: "what we describe as animated photography is not animation at all. All that happens is that a long string of snap-shot photographs […] are passed at rapid speed before the eye."[189]

The clear distinction between an appearance and essence of animation becomes murky, however, in the case of early object-animation films. With the jerky, intermittent movement of the animated objects, the mechanical apparatus of cinema is visibly suggested to the viewer in a way that destroys any strict opposition between an outer surface of animated appearance and an inner animate life. Instead of concealing the

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[188] See Vivian Sobchack, "Animation and Automation, or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being," *Screen* 50.4 (Winter 2009): pp. 375–91, here pp. 381–82. For more on this paradox of animation in film and popular culture of the 20th century, see Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012).

[189] Talbot, *Moving Pictures*, p. 7.

apparatus behind a surface of apparently continuous motion, the limitations of early object animation make the mechanical, cinematic life of the thing appear visibly dispersed throughout its lurching, material form. In this sense, object animation must be distinguished from other visions of artificial life in film. As Scott Bukatman has recently argued, cinema's dream of an artificial creation of life, as represented in later narrative films like *Der Golem* (1920) or *Metropolis* (1927), is aligned not so much with the unhomely disturbances of the uncanny but rather with the terrifying excesses of the sublime.[190] Through spectacular technological stagings, such films represent the animation of lifeless humanoid forms through the magical or technological transfer of some spark of animating energy or force. These stagings of sublime creation contrast strikingly with the uncanny life of things in early animation, which is restricted to the everyday settings and objects of the domestic sphere. The animate things in early object-animation films find their successor not so much in the monstrous, animated bodies of Expressionist cinema, but rather in the congealed animacy of its leaning walls and buildings, distorted interiors, and skewed furniture. In describing the ghastly, animate environments of Expressionist films by Murnau, Robert Wiene, and others, Gilles Deleuze provides the accurate formulation of a "*non-organic life of things*," which might just as well describe the animated objects of early cinema. "A wall which is alive is dreadful," Deleuze writes, "but utensils, furniture, houses and their roofs also lean, crowd around, lie in wait, or pounce."[191]

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[190] See Bukatman, "Disobedient Machines: Animation and Autonomy," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), pp. 128–48; and the corresponding chapter in *The Poetics of Slumberland*, pp. 135–63.

While the very first object-animation films by Blackton and Chomón were set against the gothic backdrop of the haunted house, the technique was quickly relocated to more modern interiors of urban apartments and luxury hotels. The suggestion of a ghostly agency behind the animation of things was likewise replaced with a technological fantasy of electric or magnetic automation. Following up on the success of *The Haunted Hotel*, Blackton released in late 1907 the film *Work Made Easy* (in France, *Le Travail rendu facile*), which presented the fantasy of an automated carpentry shop in which vises, hammers, and saws performed their work without the aid of a human hand.[192] Chomón's 1908 film *Déménagement magnétique* initiated a trend in early object-animation films by representing the fantasy of an automatic moving device: with the technology activated, furniture and belongings could be seen to pack themselves up, file out of an apartment, and relocate themselves automatically to a new domestic location.[193] Films like Émile Cohl's *Le Mobilier fidèle* (1910) and Roméo Bossetti's *Le Garde-meuble automatique* (1912) followed the same theme of automatically moving furniture, further emphasizing the uncanny strangeness of domestic belongings that could move on their own and seemed possessed of their own rebellious personality.[194] At the end of Cohl's *Le Mobilier*

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[191] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), quoted above, pp. 50–51 (emphasis in original). On animation and animism in the architecture of Expressionist cinema, see, especially, Spyros Papapetros, "Malicious Houses: Animism and Animosity in German Architecture and Film from Mies to Murnau," in *On the Animation of the Inorganic*, pp. 210–61.

[192] A detailed discussion of this film and its trick techniques (along with reproductions of film-stills) can be found in Talbot, *Moving* Pictures, pp. 238–39. For further descriptions of the film, see Crafton, *Before Mickey*, pp. 18–19. Crafton initially misattributes the film to a French studio (following an incorrect attribution in his historical source), but corrects the error in, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film*, pp. 126 and 327 n. 46.

[193] See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, pp. 24–25.

Figure 2.2. Émile Cohl. *Le Mobilier fidèle*, 1910. Film stills.

fidèle, a human actor falls down in gratitude after finding his furniture returned to its rightful place in his apartment, yet the viewer is also left with an uneasy feeling, having just experienced the furniture eerily lurching back into its original positions (figure 2.2). In such films, the uncanny experience of the cinematic animation itself combines with an uncanniness on the level of thematic representation: in a world of technological automation, urban domestic interiors can appear a deeply unsettling and unhomely space.

[194] As Crafton explains, the film currently distributed in English as *The Electric Moving Company* (attributed to Cohl) is in fact Bossetti's later 1912 film. See Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film*, p. 355 (cat. 56).

In a 1913 article in *Der Tag*, the novelist and dramatist Paul Ernst would respond directly to such films of animated furniture and suggest a connection between cinematic representations of automation and cinema itself as an automated machine. Ernst describes films depicting an "Umzug, bei dem die Möbel sich von selber an ihre Stelle begeben und zuletzt ein Lampentischen ratlos umherirrt, bis es seinen Platz findet."[195] For Ernst, this animation trick is only one further indication of the artlessness of cinema and its unfortunate attempt to replace traditional artworks through the operations of a machine. The connection between the animated image and the animating machine, for Ernst, lay in their mutual denial of any human, spiritual relationship with objects. The animated, cinematic image, he argues, has none of the true animating "spirit" (*Geist*) of a Dürer painting for example, and the apparatus of cinema is itself responsible for a serious degradation in one's human connection with things, which was already a general consequence of the age of machines:

> Unsere Zeit setzt ja überall an die Stelle der menschlichen Arbeit die Arbeit der Maschine. Heute beginnt allmählich den Menschen klarzuwerden, daß das Ergebnis – abgesehen von den Folgen für die beteiligten Arbeiter – doch sehr seine Bedenken hat, schon bei den einfachsten gewerblichen Gegenständen; überall wo wir eine seelische Beziehung zu dem Gegenstande haben wollen, wirkt die Maschinenarbeit roh und gemein. Im Kino wird der Versuch gemacht, die höchste Betätigung des Menschen, die Kunst, durch Maschinenbetrieb herzustellen.[196]

Intentionally or not, the uncanny images of early object animation seem, ironically, to reinforce Ernst's point about the human consequences of automated machines. This is perhaps nowhere more clear than in the object-animation films that

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[195] Paul Ernst, "Möglichkeiten einer Kinokunst" [1913], reprinted in Kaes (ed.), *Kino-Debatte*, pp. 118–23, quoted here, p. 122.

[196] Ibid., pp. 122–23.

Figure 2.3. Segundo de Chomón. *El Hotel eléctrico*, 1907. Film stills.

bring humans and things together in order to depict the ambivalent effects of automation. Perhaps the most spectacular film in this regard is Chomón's *El Hotel eléctrico*, released in Paris in 1907.[197] The trick-film depicts a vacationing couple checking into a modern, luxury hotel where all services are automated by the force of a central, electro-magnetic

[197] While Chomón's production of the film is sometimes put at 1905, I follow Crafton's argument that such an early date is unlikely given the *El Hotel eléctrico*'s later release date and clear borrowing of Blackton's animation technique. The surviving film is the U.S. release, *Electric Hotel*, dated 1908. See Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film*, pp. 133 and 329 n. 72.

generator. Their luggage appears to move on its own up to their hotel room where the bags then proceed to playfully unpack their contents. In extended close-up sequences, the film depicts animated brushes shining the man's shoes and the couple being treated to separate hairstyling sessions carried out by animated combs, hairbrushes, razors, and towels. The film ends with a breakdown in automated technology: the main generator goes haywire, sending all the animated furniture and objects in the hotel into a frenzied and violent commotion. The human figures are caught in a maelstrom of rapidly moving objects, which persists until the very end of the film. Within the nightmare of uncontrollable automation, the human is rendered helpless and immobile, appearing like a lifeless prop in inverse relation to the liveliness of things (figure 2.3).

To a large extent, the respective lifelessness of humans in object-animation films is a consequence of limitations inherent to the technique. To include human figures within object-animation sequences, as Chomón does, the actor had to remain fixed and stationary between frames as objects were slightly repositioned. In the hairstyling sequences, with the human face in close-up, the procedure was something like a cinematic sampling of the long sittings required for nineteenth-century photographic portraits. Instead of a discrete, long-exposure photograph, which smooths over all temporal variations into a final static image, the frames of the cinematic animation sequence consist of instant, photographic fragments of the slight variations in facial expression and position as they unfolded in real time during the shooting of the film. As the filmstrip plays back, the comb or hairbrush in Chomón's *El Hotel eléctrico* appears to move about the actor's face with its own animate life, while the human actor appears nearly stationary aside from a strange, mechanical twitching of the face. In this manner,

early object animation corresponds to both sides of Jentsch's uncanny: an uncertainty as to the animacy of the supposedly lifeless thing as well as the apparently living human. In early object-animation sequences, the life of the human appears somewhere between the jerky, mechanical movements of the automaton and the unconscious twitchings of the spasmodic body. With the fantasy of the total automatization of things came an unsettling vision of the immobilized and nerve-wracked human.[198]

When the technique of object animation was first commercially exploited around 1907, it was merely one more cinematic novelty among many—and a late one at that. The production and short-lived popularity of object-animation films between 1907 and 1912 might very well be understood as a last ditch attempt to uphold the appeal of the early trick-film during a period in which storytelling and narrative editing emerged as the dominant mode of cinematic production.[199] As Donald Crafton has shown, the attractive mystery of early object animation was itself a product of advertisement campaigns and myths perpetuated by filmmakers and industry insiders. The technique of object animation was in fact well known and occasionally used before 1907. Thus, the

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[198] In early cinema, this strange effect on the human actor was simply an unavoidable byproduct of the object-animation technique. After World War II, the technique of animating human actors through similar frame-by-frame repositionings and exposures would be given the name "pixilation," which aptly describes both the fragmentation of movement into individual pictures (*pix*) as well as the fantastic, crazed appearance of the depicted human (preserved etymologically in *pixie* and *pixilated*). The term and technique is usually attributed to the early 1950s work of Canadian filmmaker Norman McLaren. For a discussion of the technique used in his films *Neighbours* and *Two Bagatelles* (both 1952), see McLaren's technical notes, reprinted in Robert Russett and Cecile Starr (eds.), *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976), pp. 125–26.

[199] What Tom Gunning famously calls the "cinema of attractions" (that is, the early, exhibitionist cinema of actuality and trick-based films) dominated up until 1906–7, followed by a "true narrativization of the cinema" that culminated in the first feature films after 1910. See Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, pp. 56–62, here p. 60.

numerous accounts of an underlying mystery and sudden discovery of animation around 1907 cannot be taken at face value. Rather, as Crafton has argued, the proliferation of object-animation films after 1907 can be attributed, at least partially, to economic factors. With the market saturation and declining appeal of familiar cinematic tricks at the time, along with the emergence of longer narrative films, it became advantageous to invest in the more expensive and tedious production of longer animation sequences in order to recapture the astonishment of early film audiences. Bolstered by advertisements and journalistic accounts extolling the impenetrable mysteries of animated objects on the screen, such films enjoyed a short-lived popularity that would not last much beyond 1910.[200] In German cinema around 1910, the technique of object animation also found an eerily fitting application in the nascent industry of advertisement films. As if to literalize Karl Marx's famous description of the commodity fetish as an animated thing, film-advertising pioneers Guido Seeber and Julius Pinschewer began exploiting the technique of object animation to present film audiences with commodities that magically moved and danced as if on their own.[201] In all of its early manifestations, the technique of object animation remained largely peripheral to trends in the historical development of cinema toward the longer, dramatic narrative and feature film. Like much else of the early

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[200] On the above points, see Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey*, pp. 13–33. Crafton also cites less frequent examples of animated objects, drawings, and text in films before 1907. It is only after 1907, however, that object-animation films become a more common feature in film production. Crafton documents the numerous advertisements, articles, reviews, and statements that contributed to the myth of animation's origins around 1907.

[201] For a discussion of Seeber and Pinschewer's early advertisement films, including object-animation films like *Der Nähkasten* and *Sekt-Zauber* (both 1912), see Jeanpaul Goergen, "Julius Pinschewer: A Trade-mark Cinema," in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996), pp. 168–74; and Annika Schoemann, *Der deutsche Animationsfilm*, pp. 85–101.

"cinema of attractions," the technique's cinematic legacy consists largely in its underground connection to the practices and techniques of the 1920s cinematic avant-garde (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4).

Literary Animations and Cinematic Aesthetics

For the purposes of the present argument, early object-animation films are of particular interest for their close historical intersection with new, representational strategies in modernist literature. Previous accounts of the time period, such as Anton Kaes's careful reconstruction of what he terms the "debate about cinema" (*Kino-Debatte*), stress the critical confrontation between literature and film carried out in German literary journals and newspapers after 1909. Common to cultural criticism of the time was the charge that the increasingly "literary" ambitions of cinema (that is, its appropriation of subject matter from both classic and popular literature and its offerings of alternative, narrative-based entertainment) were a direct and degrading encroachment on the bourgeois literary institutions of the theater and novel. In the early period of short actuality and trick-based films, the audiences were primarily urban and lower class and could be kept separate from the "official" literary culture of the educated bourgeoisie. However, with the rapid proliferation of permanent cinema venues in urban centers and the emergence of longer narrative films, by 1910 the German literary establishment felt forced into a critical confrontation with an industry that threatened its readership and cultural dominance. Responses were varied, as Kaes documents, from a staunch defense of cultural heritage (by conservative critics), to an elitist condemnation of film as part of a trivial, urban mass culture (by certain Expressionist writers), to attempts at radicalizing literary technique to

meet demands for an increasing speed, precision, and discontinuity in the more traditional arts within the age of cinema (by modernist writers like Alfred Döblin and Bertolt Brecht).[202]

What goes missing in these charged debates are the significant ways in which literary and cinematic representations also converged historically in terms of new thematic content around 1910. The case of animated objects, I argue, presents an important intersection between literary and cinematic imaginations at a time when the old and new media were seen to be largely at odds. On the one hand, this convergence can be attributed to a common historical reflection on the increased animation and animosity of things experienced within the modern technological world (as previously discussed in terms of an "urban uncanny"). On the other hand, this point of intersection also provided a productive impulse for the fashioning of new modernist strategies of literary representation as well as an emerging cinematic aesthetics based on the transformed status of objects on film. With regard to the latter point, Georg Lukács's tentative thoughts on an "aesthetics of cinema" already anticipate the importance of a "life" or animation of things in 1920s film theory and avant-garde cinema (to be explored in Chapter 4). The fashioning of a cinematic aesthetics based on a new "life of things" on film (found in various forms in the interwar film theory and practice of figures like Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Jean Epstein, Fernand Léger, and Hans Richter) can be found to emerge first in earlier reflections on cinema from around 1910. Here, the contentious

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[202] On the above points, see Kaes, *Kino-Debatte*, pp. 1–35. For an historical account of early film audiences and exhibition spaces in Germany before World War I, see also Miriam Hansen, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?," *New German Critique* 29 (Spring-Summer 1983): pp. 147–84.

relationship between film and literature led more literarily oriented writers like Lukács and others (who will be discussed below) to isolate the visual animation of things as a unique capability of cinema, which distinguished it from literature and pointed toward new, aesthetic possibilities. At the same time, modernist literature itself responded to the new, visual possibilities of cinematic animation by experimenting with representational strategies that deliberately evoked a material life and agency of things. This productive, two-way exchange between modernist literature and an emerging, cinematic aesthetics will be explored in the remaining pages of the chapter.

Anton Kaes already cites Alfred Döblin's one-act play, *Lydia und Mäxchen* (1906) as an early instance of trick-films influencing the literary arts. As in the object-animation film in which things take on a vexing, animate life in opposition to humans, Döblin's play grants character status to all the otherwise inanimate props on stage, having them rebel against their assigned background roles, threaten the audience, and even attack the author of the play when he comes on stage to investigate the commotion. Alongside the human characters, Döblin provocatively lists under "Personen" in the play: "Der Stuhl. Das Spind. Der Kandelaber."[203] Although the staging of the play requires human actors to inhabit these inanimate objects, the overall effect of the performance was to evoke an uncanny life of things analogous to contemporaneous trick-films. The representations of early cinema were further integrated into the makings of a new modernist poetics with Döblin's 1913 "Berliner Programm." Here, Döblin calls for an emphatic rejection of nineteenth-century realism, psychology, and the "hegemony of the

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[203] See Alfred Döblin, *Lydia und Mäxchen: Tiefe Verbeugung in einem Akt* [1906], in *Drama Hörspiel Film* (Olten and Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter, 1983), pp. 9–31, quoted here, p. 9.

author" (*Hegemonie des Autors*), to be replaced by a literary "cinema-style" (*Kinostil*), which presents the reader instead with the hard, dynamic reality of the modern, material environment: "Die Darstellung erfordert bei der ungeheuren Menge des Geformten einen Kinostil. In höchster Gedrängtheit und Präzision hat 'die Fülle der Gesichte' vorbeizuziehen. Der Sprache das Äußerste der Plastik und Lebendigkeit abzuringen."[204] With regards to modernist prose, Döblin demands further that the author renounce their hegemonic control over the world they represent and instead merge with and inhabit its material objects and events: "ich bin nicht ich, sondern die Straße, die Laternen, dies und dies Ereignis, weiter nichts."[205] The loss of authorial control coinciding with the animation of material things, as staged in Döblin's 1906 play, becomes here the guiding principle for a new poetics of modernist prose.

Around the very same time, the cinematic possibilities of object animation also captured the literary imaginations of both the American modernist poet Vachel Lindsay as well as the Italian Futurists. In proclaiming a Futurist literature and cinema after 1910, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti demanded a similar eradication of the human ego and psychology, to be replaced by dramas of animated objects, automata, machines, and forces of matter. Citing the "movements of matter" found in a variety of early trick-films, Marinetti's 1912 "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" initiates a poetic exploration of the dynamic life of "free-ranging objects and capricious engines" and the

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[204] Alfred Döblin, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker [Berliner Programm]," *Der Sturm* 4 (1913/14): pp. 17–18. Reprinted in Döblin, *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur*, (Olten and Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter, 1989), pp. 119–23, quoted here, pp. 121 and 122. Cf., Kaes, *Kino-Debatte*, p. 25.

[205] Döblin, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker," p. 122.

replacement of the "psychology of man […] with the *lyrical obsession for matter*."[206] Similar to Döblin, the goal was to isolate a mode of literary production that could adequately convey the hard technological realities of modernity, like the "solidity of a sheet of steel" or the "life of the motorcar."[207] While the poetics outlined here expressly deny the anthropomorphization of things, subsequent Futurist manifestos and productions would also push for a "drama of objects" in theater as well as their own cinematic works, which were to feature: "animated objects that are humanized, wearing makeup and clothes, given emotions, civilized, dancing—objects abstracted from their normal environments and placed in an unfamiliar situation which, by way of contrast, highlights their breathtaking construction and nonhuman life."[208] Making more explicit reference to earlier cinematic precedents, Vachel Lindsay's 1915 book *The Art of the Moving Picture* discusses the "personality in furniture" found in a trick-film titled *Moving Day* (nearly identical in conception to Cohl's *Le Mobilier fidèle* or Bossetti's *Le Garde-meuble automatique*) and calls for even more productive use of similar animation techniques to make "the mechanical or non-human object […] the hero in most any sort of photoplay."[209]

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[206] F.T. Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" [1912], in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), pp. 107–19, quoted here, p. 111 (emphasis in original).

[207] Ibid., p. 111.

[208] See Marinetti et al., "The Futurist Cinema" [1916], in *Critical Writings*, pp. 260–65, quoted here p. 264. For a programmatic statement on Futurist theater as a direct competition with cinema and featuring a "drama of objects" as in Marinetti's 1915 play *Vengono*, see Marinetti et al., "A Futurist Theater of Essential Brevity" [1915], in *Critical Writings*, pp. 200–7, here, p. 205.

[209] Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* [1915] (New York: Modern Library, 2000), pp. 40–41.

This collection of examples already demonstrates the broad range of productive, literary responses to the potentials of early cinematic animation. While writers like Marinetti and Döblin drew on early trick-films in their development of anti-humanist and avant-garde literary tactics, they also saw the provocative, comedic potential of animated and humanized objects on stage and on film. Lindsay, for his part, situates object-animation films in continuity with an older, literary tradition of fairy tales and stresses the specifically *narrative* potential of such cinematic representations, given their ability to visually animate and lend dramatic, personality to things.[210] The possibilities of cinematic animation thus provoke two seemingly contradictory responses in the imagination of literary writers after 1910. On the one hand, there is the dehumanized and absolute otherness of a quasi-hostile, material life of things in modernity. Here, as expressed in Döblin's and Marinetti's manifestos, literature must construct for readers a dynamic and dehumanized experience of things somehow comparable to their modern, material surroundings. On the other hand, the imaginative animation of things also has the potential to humanize and anthropomorphize one's thingly environment, allowing formerly inanimate objects to become personalities in the artistic work and play an active part in its story. The literary response to early cinema thus presents a highly ambivalent understanding of object animation. The animated object is at once a representational approximation of the new, material environment of modern life—utterly threatening and other—and yet also somehow humanized and familiar, taking on a new humanlike personality and agency in the absence of a more traditional, human protagonist.

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[210] See, in particular, Lindsay's chapters, "The Motion Picture of Fairy Splendor" and "Furniture, Trappings, and Inventions in Motion," in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, pp. 38–42 and 84–94, respectively.

Among modernist literary representations, the strange objects appearing in Rilke's *Malte* novel and Kafka's "Blumfeld" story, mentioned earlier on in the chapter, perhaps most convincingly encapsulate this ambivalent status of the animated thing. While the works of Rilke and Kafka have little directly in common with either Döblin and Marinetti's avant-garde poetics of dynamic matter or Lindsay's fairy tale objects, both modernist writers evoke animated things as part of a deliberate reflection on the threatening material environment of modern life and as more anthropomorphic figures for investigating familiar and interpersonal relations among humans and things. In both cases, a mix of domestic familiarity and threatening strangeness situates the animated object firmly within the realm of the uncanny. With similar origins in the acoustic disturbances of urban housing, Rilke's and Kafka's noisy, animated things make for a complex, literary complement to the visual representations of early object-animation films. Whether drawing directly on cinematic representations (as in Kafka's "Blumfeld") or merely contiguous with new cinematic animation techniques (as in Rilke's *Malte*), the figure of the animated, living thing proves a powerful fiction for investigating both the animistic anxieties and uncertainties tied to the experiential conditions of urban life as well as modern, social relations among humans and things.

On June 19, 1907, Rilke wrote to his wife from Paris, describing his difficulties getting settled back down in the big city: "ich weiß nicht, warum ich diesmal so schwerfällig bin im Eingewöhnen und Einwohnen. Die Nachbarschaft ist nicht schlimm, und doch, es ist wieder das Paris, das Malte Laurids aufgezehrt hat."[211] The particular situation troubling him, as Rilke describes in the letter, concerns a student in a

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[211] Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1906 bis 1907*, p. 271.

neighboring apartment and his tormented struggle to keep at his long hours of study. During moments of periodic desperation, the student can be heard stomping about his room and repeatedly throwing to the floor "some unknown tin objects" (*irgendwelche blecherne Dinge*), whose sudden crashing and rattling keep Rilke in a state of perpetual nervousness. Returning to his work on what would become his 1910 novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke would later expand upon this initial description and include it in a series of sections in the second half of the novel. Mediated through Malte's understanding of the incident, the student and his crashing tin object become a far-reaching allegory for the modern, corrupted relationship between humans and things. Out of the domestic noise disturbances of the city, Rilke's novel develops a particular, animistic imaginary in which humans appear plagued by a phantasmal host of unruly, animate things.[212]

In his insightful analysis of the role of sound and hearing in Rilke's *Malte*, Michael Cowan reads this and related episodes of noise disturbance in the novel as contributing to a "kind of imaginary animism of noisy things," whereby Malte, "imbu[es] the sounds he hears with a malevolent agency aimed against himself."[213] In Cowan's account, Malte's alleged animism serves a specific strategic function in the text: it is an attempt to externalize all the threatening noises of the city and thus preserve a sense of the artist's hermetic interiority. If the novel ultimately demonstrates the impossibility of

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[212] The whole episode can be found in Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Werke*, vol. 3, pp. 578–85.

[213] See Michael Cowan, "Imagining Modernity Through the Ear: Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* and the Noise of Modern Life," *Arcadia* 41.1 (2006): pp. 124–46, quoted here, p. 139.

closing oneself off to the noisy disturbances of modernity, Malte's imaginative animation or anthropomorphization of things appears as a repeated attempt to project and displace his own nervous and fragmented state out onto the objects of the material world.[214] While Cowan's reading is convincing, I would like to shift attention away from the particular, psychological mechanisms involved in Malte's "imaginary animism" and instead resituate such episodes in relation to a broader set of representations around 1910. Rather than reconfirming Rilke and his protagonist's desire to fend off the disturbances of the modern city, I would like to highlight the productive (rather than reactive) dimension of Rilke's representations of animated things, which they share with contemporaneous works of both literature and film.

As I argue at length in Chapter 1, Rilke's understanding of the "thing" (*Ding*) relies on an implicit conception of a mimetic relationship between the human and nonhuman. The episode of the neighboring student and the tin object in *Malte* holds to this conception and expands it to nightmarish proportions. Malte's initial preoccupation with the struggling medical student leads to a far stronger fixation on the exact object responsible for all the crashing noises next door. Imagining the object to be some sort of "round, tin box or can" (*eine runde Büchse*) with a corresponding "lid" (*Büchsendeckel*), Malte describes a mimetic similarity between the corrupted state of humans and their corresponding world of things. In this particular case, the student's inability to stay focused and on top of his task is the cause of a similar ill-temperedness on the part of the tin container, whose lid refuses to stay put in its proper place. Explaining further, "wie verwirrend der Umgang mit den Menschen auf die Dinge gewirkt hat," Malte expands

[214] See, in particular, ibid., pp. 139–44.

upon his discussion of the tin object to offer a more universal vision of the corruption of things:

> Es ist kein Wunder, wenn [die Dinge] verdorben sind, wenn sie den Geschmack verlieren an ihrem natürlichen, stillen Zweck und das Dasein so ausnutzen möchten, wie sie es rings um sich ausgenutzt sehen. Sie machen Versuche, sich ihren Anwendungen zu entziehen, sie werden unlustig und nachlässig, und die Leute sind gar nicht erstaunt, wenn sie sie auf einer Ausschweifung ertappen. Sie kennen das so gut von sich selbst. Sie ärgern sich, weil sie die Stärkeren sind, weil sie mehr Recht auf Abwechslung zu haben meinen, weil sie sich nachgeäfft fühlen; aber sie lassen die Sache gehen, wie sie sich selber gehen lassen.[215]

With its description of imitative aping and a near-slapstick conflict with rebellious things, the passage above could work just as well as a concept for any number of early object-animation films. On July 17, 1907, just a month after Rilke's letter describing the crashing tin object in his neighbor's apartment, Blackton's *L'Hôtel hanté* opened at the largest cinema venues in Paris and ran twice daily till the end of the month.[216] Given this close proximity of both time and place, Rilke's subsequent work on the corresponding episode in the *Malte* novel reads as if he had translated his initial, acoustic experience into a literary account informed by the new, visual representations of object-animation films.[217] Beyond speculations of influence, the more important insight to draw from this comparison involves a distinction in the manner of representing the animacy of things. Had Rilke drawn directly on visual, cinematic representations of animated objects, his

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[215] Ibid., pp. 582–83.

[216] See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 14.

[217] Given the popularity of Blackton's *L'Hôtel hanté* and its aggressive advertising campaign, it is possible that Rilke had some awareness of the animation techniques then being exploited for mass entertainment in Paris. Since his literary rendering of the episode in *Malte* likely followed his letter by over a month, some peripheral influence of early trick-films on his literary imagination is at least conceivable. Establishing any direct influence, however, remains purely speculative and is not particularly helpful given Rilke's elitist disregard for mass culture.

literary account would appear crudely comical at best. Malte never enters his neighbor's room to see the rebellious object in question. In fact, it would be slightly ridiculous to represent Malte as experiencing the thing's animate personality in any direct, visual encounter. Instead, Rilke's *Malte* evokes the isolated *sounds* of unseen objects to adequately capture the uncanny presences and uncertainties that make up the experiential environment of the big city.

In its account of a corrupt relationship between humans and things, the episode in *Malte* does, however, present a striking parallel to the images of contemporaneous trick-films. As in the object-animation film, Malte's account of the relationship between humans and things involves an uncanny inversion: a greater animacy on the side of things and an increasingly thinglike or mechanical quality on the side of humans. Instead of a direct visual presentation, Rilke's novel achieves a similar effect through the symbolic representation of sound. Malte explains:

> so ein blecherner Gegenstand fiel nebenan, rollte, blieb liegen, und dazwischen, in gewissen Abständen, stampfte es. Wie alle Geräusche, die sich wiederholt durchsetzen, hatte auch dieses sich innerlich organisiert; es wandelte sich ab, es war niemals genau dasselbe. […] Es konnte heftig sein oder milde oder melancholisch; es konnte gleichsam überstürzt vorübergehen oder unendlich lange hingleiten, eh es zu Ruhe kam. Und das letzte Schwanken war immer überraschend. Dagegen hatte das Aufstampfen, das hinzukam, etwas fast Mechanisches.[218]

The inner variation and humanlike personality of the tin object, which comes through in its crashing noises, contrasts starkly with the sounds of its human companion. In describing the accompanying, stamping noises of the student, Malte's language suggests the mechanical regularity of an automaton or machine. The uncanny blurring of animate

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[218] Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 579.

and inanimate, human and thing, (as initially discussed in relation to Polgar's "Die Dinge") is again a consequence of hearing being severed from visual experience in the cramped domestic spaces of the city. The uncanny images of object-animation films can be understood to offer a popular, visual counterpart to the sound-based phantasms explored in modernist literature. In Rilke's *Malte*, the thinglike quality of human behavior is further reinforced through a description of the student's malady: his one eyelid purportedly lowers automatically, like a broken "Rouleau" or "Fenstervorhang."[219] If visually represented, the literary description would no doubt translate nicely into a comical, cinematic close-up of the pixilated and nerve-wracked human.

Where Rilke's novel does attempt to visualize the animacy of things (in the final part of the section on the tin object), the reference is not to contemporaneous cinematic pictures, but rather to a much older tradition of Western painterly representation. Malte notes:

> Wie begreif ich jetzt die wunderlichen Bilder, darinnen Dinge von beschränkten und regelmäßigen Gebrauchen sich ausspannen und sich lüstern und neugierig aneinander versuchen, zuckend in der ungefähren Unzucht der Zerstreuung. Diese Kessel, die kochend herumgehen, diese Kolben, die auf Gedanken kommen, und die müßigen Trichter, die sich in ein Loch drängen zu ihrem Vergnügen. Und da sind auch schon, vom eifersüchtigen Nichts heraufgeworfen, Gliedmaßen und Glieder unter ihnen und Gesichter, die warm in sie hineinvomieren, und blasende Gesäße, die ihnen den Gefallen tun.[220]

Critics who have commented on the passage identify the likely source for the description as images of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Hieronymous Bosch or Pieter Bruegel the Elder (figure 2.4). The visual reference in Rilke's novel succeeds in elevating the

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[219] See Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren, 1906 bis 1907*, p. 271; and the related passage in *Malte*, pp. 579–80.

[220] Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Werke*, vol. 3, pp. 583–84.

Figure 2.4. Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1556. Drawing.

acoustic disturbances of urban housing to a whole hellish plague of hybrid creatures, demons, and monsters as depicted in paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[221] Malte's reference to these "fantastic pictures" serves a twofold function. First, by evoking an honored representational tradition from the history of Western painting, he is able to provide a respectable justification for his peculiar, animistic fear of things. Second, the reference establishes an experiential rupture in the present, equivalent to the hellish torments of the third- and fourth-century Christian saint. In the image of Saint Anthony of Egypt, Malte imagines the modern artist to suffer a similar plague of hostile,

[221] On Bosch's hybrid creatures and historical models, see Joseph Leo Koerner, "Bosch's Equipment," in *Things That Talk*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone, 2004), pp. 27–65.

"degenerate things" (*entartete Geräte*) intent on hatefully disrupting and harassing the solitary artist. "Es gab Zeiten, da ich diese Bilder für veraltet hielt," comments Malte: "Nun aber weiß ich, daß diese Arbeit [die lange Arbeit des Künstlers] genau so bestritten ist wie das Heiligsein; daß dies da um jeden entsteht, der um ihretwillen einsam ist, wie es sich bildete um die Einsamen Gottes in ihren Höhlen und leeren Herbergen, einst."[222]

This one episode from Rilke's *Malte*, of course, cannot simply be taken in isolation from the complexities of the novel as a whole. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, Malte's persistent identification with shattering and animate objects in the novel is closely interwoven with his disturbing fantasies of the fragmented body. The phantasm of the fragmented body, which links Malte's childhood experience with his adult traumas in the city of Paris, involves a breakdown in boundaries between animate and inanimate, body and world, through which Malte comes to sympathize with and enliven a whole array of objects—from the "geistesabwesende, verschlafene Dinge" and "kleine, schwächliche Gegenstände" found in his grandfather's manor-house when he was a child to the exposed, interior wall of a demolished house encountered during his adult stay in Paris.[223] In Huyssen's innovative, psychoanalytic reading (and repeated in Cowan's more recent analysis) the animation of things in Rilke's novel is attributed to a displacement and projection of Malte's own traumatic symptoms out onto the world of inanimate things.[224]

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[222] Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, in *Werke*, vol. 3, quoted above, pp. 583–84.

[223] Ibid., quoted here, p. 461; and for Malte's experience of the interior wall, see pp. 485–87.

My point here is not to contest the considerable insight of nuanced, psychoanalytically informed readings. Rather, I hope to add yet another layer of historical complexity to what has become one of the most pivotal texts in German modernism. In Chapter 1, I sought to fit the fearful identification with objects in *Malte* into a larger continuum of mimetic thing-relations in Rilke's writings, which include the far more positive and stabilizing relations staged in many of the "thing-poems" (*Dinggedichte*) found in the two-volume *Neue Gedichte*. In the present reading, I hope to establish Malte's troubling vision of a corrupted and inverted relationship between humans and things as part of a larger, historical and specifically urban imaginary that involves both modernist literary texts and early object-animation films. Huyssen's reading of Rilke rightly emphasizes the Freudian uncanny of Malte's psychic disturbances, which emerge out of an unstable relationship between repressed childhood anxieties and the fragmentary experiences of the metropolis. The specific incident of the tin object, however, also corresponds to Jentsch's particular description of the uncanny, with its emphasis on uncertainty, sensory interference, and the blurring of experiential boundaries between animate and inanimate, human and thing.

While Rilke's extensive, literary exploration of things makes no direct reference to the emerging mass medium of cinema, commentators on early cinema draw surprisingly similar conclusions about the state of human-thing relations in modernity. And in both cases, the representation of animate things plays a decisive role. Rilke's literary reflections are largely limited to the perspective of the solitary artist and aesthete,

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[224] See Andreas Huyssen, "Paris/Childhood: The Fragmented Body in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*" [1989], in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 105–26, here pp. 115–17.

who finds his work disrupted by an unruly life of things in the city. Early cinema provided a popular, visual counterpart for expressing similar modern anxieties for a broader spectrum of city-dwellers. Correlating the precision, energy, and speed of the modern city with the "Leben eines Kinematographentheaters," the Austrian writer and performer Egon Friedell argued in a 1912 lecture that the modern age marked an end to an older relationship with objects: "Für nichts haben wir ja heutzutage weniger Sinn als für jenes idyllisches Ausruhen und epische Verweilen bei den Gegenständen, das früher gerade für poetisch galt. Wir lassen uns nicht mehr behaglich über den Dingen nieder."[225] Rilke's poetic project of the *Neue Gedichte*, as I argue in Chapter 1, can be read as a literary struggle against this very situation—an attempt to artificially stage and instantiate the type of relationship with things that was denied by the experience of urban modernity. For Friedell by contrast—formulating his observations in relation to film—this experiential character of urban modernity offered to aesthetic representation a productive field of "Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten."[226]

In his 1912 lecture, "Prolog vor dem Film," Friedell offers two main examples for the new aesthetic possibilities opened up in the age of cinema and the modern metropolis. One aspect was the increasing importance of gesture and facial expression in the arts, brought about both by the wordless, visual realm of cinema and the predominance of nonverbal communication on the crowded, bustling streets of the city. His other example had to do with the elevation of inanimate things to the status of dramatic actor:

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[225] Egon Friedell, "Prolog vor dem Film" [1912], in Kaes (ed.), *Kino-Debatte*, pp. 42–47, quoted here, pp. 43–44.

[226] Ibid., p. 43.

> bedenken Sie doch, welche Möglichkeiten sich für einen ingeniösen und temperamentvollen Dramatiker im Kino eröffnen würden, der es verstände, die unbelebte Umgebung des Menschen, also das, was man bisher ziemlich abfällig Dekoration genannt hat, entsprechend auszunutzen. Ich meine nicht bloß in dem äußerlichen Sinne, daß im Kino weniger technische Hindernisse bestehen als im Theater, und daß der Kinodichter eigentlich die ganze Erdoberfläche als Bühne zur Verfügung hat, sondern noch in dem anderen Sinne, daß ein solcher Dramatiker es verstehen müßte, die stumme Außenwelt als einen wirksamen Faktor in die Handlung einzuführen und in die Schicksale des Menschen als handelnde Person mit eingreifen zu lassen, nicht als bloße Ausstattungs-angelegenheit, die man auch ebensogut weglassen kann, sondern als das Gegenteil von Staffage, so zwar, daß man eher den Eindruck hätte, daß die Menschen die Staffage, die Dekoration sind.[227]

Friedell's sense of the aesthetic possibilities of film corresponds closely to what Döblin, Marinetti, and Vachel Lindsay all found attractive about the new medium. At the same time, Friedell also looks backward to late-nineteenth-century works of Richard Wagner, Maeterlinck, and Zola as literary precursors that explored the role of nonhuman actors in literature.[228] Whatever the role of the "dead things" (*tote Dinge*) that Friedell alludes to in these older works, they still lack the animated life of objects found in trick-films of the early twentieth century.

Like Lukács's allusion to Romanticism or Lindsay's appeal to the fairy tale, such references clearly situate the new cinematic aesthetics of animated things as emerging out of a more long-standing, literary imagination. At the same time, the comparison with past literary works also underlines a distinction between the symbolic, fantastic, or phantasmatic life of things in literature and the new, direct experiences of visual

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[227] Ibid., p. 44.

[228] See ibid., pp. 44–45: "Denken Sie an Richard Wagner oder an Maeterlinck; die Hauptfigur im 'Tod des Tintagiles' ist ja eigentlich eine Tür. Auch bei Zola läßt sich der Versuch beobachten, tote Dinge gewissermaßen zu Romanhelden zu machen, das zeigen schon die Titel einiger seiner Werke." For more on the theatrical roles of objects in the 18th and 19th centuries, cf. Volker Klotz, *Gegenstand als Gegenspieler: Widersacher auf der Bühne: Dinge, Briefe, aber auch Barbiere* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2000).

animation in cinema. While writers like Rilke and Polgar would situate the animacy of things as merely a phantasm of the fraught interiority of the modern city-dweller, modernist literature would also respond directly to the new cinematic life of things found in trick-films. Not merely contiguous or complementary to such cinematic representations, Kafka's fragmentary 1915 story "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle" explicitly incorporates cinematic representations of animated things as a productive element within an experimental, modernist narrative.

Kafka's longstanding fascination and engagement with film has been well documented by Hanns Zischler, and the influence of the new medium on his experiments in literary narration has been a frequent focus in the work of Kafka scholars, Peter-André Alt most recently.[229] Kafka's own journals, as many critics have noted, can even be read as beginning (in 1909) with a textual reenactment of the primal scene of early cinema: the audience's response to the Lumière brothers' 1896 film, *L' Arrivée d'un train à la gare de La Ciotat*.[230] But while adequate attention has been paid to the influence of cinema on Kafka's dynamic representations of moving vehicles and traffic, uncanny doubles, and silent gestural expression, there has been little serious consideration of early object animation in relation to his literary writing. On the bouncing balls in Kafka's "Blumfeld" fragment, for example, Peter-André Alt simply notes: "Die komische Wirkung der Szene entsteht aus der Übertragung einer filmischen Verfolgungsdramaturgie auf den Kampf zwischen Mensch und Ding. Nicht zuletzt ist es die slapstickartige Körpersprache

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[229] See Hanns Zischler, *Kafka geht ins Kino* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1996); and Peter-André Alt, *Kafka und der Film: Über kinematographisches Erzählen* (Munich: Beck, 2009).

[230] See Kafka's very first, surviving journal entry in his *Tagebücher*, p. 9: "Die Zuschauer erstarren, wenn der Zug vorbeifährt."

Blumfelds, mit deren Hilfe Kafkas Sequenz ihren grotesken Effekt freisetzt."[231] The connection to film is obvious, but perhaps it also demands a closer investigation.

Within the context (and as a culmination) of the present argument, I would suggest a more nuanced reading of the bouncing ball scene in Kafka's "Blumfeld." The episode can be read, I argue, as part of a complex literary experiment, which integrates the various aspects of an *urban uncanny* as I have historically reconstructed it. Drawing on Kafka's own anxieties about unknown noises in his apartment, the "Blumfeld" story lends concrete existence to the kind of animate objects that, in Polgar's and Rilke's texts, exist only as psychological phantasms. The autonomous "Lärmapparat" that Kafka describes hearing through his apartment ceiling reappears within the represented world of the "Blumfeld" text as a directly observable, animate thing. Near the beginning of the story, Blumfeld returns to his apartment and hears through his front door, "ein eigentümliches klapperndes Geräusch, sehr lebhaft aber, sehr regelmäßig."[232] Upon entering and turning on the lights, he discovers the cause: "Das ist ja Zauberei, zwei kleine weiße blaugestreifte Celluloidbälle springen auf dem Parkett nebeneinander auf und ab; schlägt der eine auf den Boden, ist der andere in der Höhe und unermüdlich führen sie ihr Spiel aus."[233] The bizarre encounter and the ensuing comical interaction between Blumfeld and the bouncing balls certainly suggest a cinematic reference. But Kafka's text does more than simply borrow its content from early trick-films. Rather, the visual representations of object animation provide Kafka with the fictional means to

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[231] Alt, *Kafka und der Film*, p. 88.

[232] Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, p. 232.

[233] Ibid., pp. 232–33.

explore and narratively develop the kind of animistic anxieties that occur in the modern city. Blumfeld does not remain in his apartment fretting about noises and hostile, animate things. Instead, by materializing these anxieties as concrete entities, Kafka's text draws its protagonist out of his isolation and explores his estranged, domestic situation in relation to a broader field of social relations involving his neighbors and coworkers. The key to this narrative development is the representational possibility—opened up by the new medium of cinema—to make the inanimate thing an actual agent or actor within the narrative.

As a starting point, Blumfeld's interaction with the animated balls might be understood, as Alt suggests, as structured according to the "Verfolgungsdramaturgie" of the early trick-film. In his 1911 essay on cinema, Georg Lukács describes one such film, which could have served as a model for Kafka's literary text: "Die Kugeln, mit denen eine Gesellschaft Kegel schieben wollte, werden rebellisch und verfolgen sie über Berge und Felder, durch Flüsse schwimmend, auf Brücken springend und auf hohe Treppen hinaufjagend, bis endlich auch die Kegel lebendig werden und die Kugeln abholen."[234] One can easily imagine such a film. It would be composed of a series of shots, interchanging between live-action scenes of the humans fleeing and scenes of the rolling and bouncing balls, either manipulated physically from off-screen or animated through object-animation sequences. This particular, cinematic illusion of a "Kampf zwischen Mensch und Ding," however, bears little resemblance to the episode in Kafka's "Blumfeld." The close and dynamic interaction between Blumfeld's bodily movements and the bouncing balls in his apartment would have found no precursor in early cinematic

[234] Lukács, "Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kinos," in Kaes (ed.) *Kino-Debatte*, p. 116.

representations. To animate things in that close proximity to a dynamic human figure would have been impossible to achieve visually given the limitations of early object animation. Instead of simply presenting a literary equivalent of a familiar, cinematic slapstick scene, as Alt's reading suggests, Kafka's text does something far more interesting. His literary rendering introduces into the diegetic space of the text a fantastical and specifically *filmic* entity. As a material manifestation, the balls already reference their medial origin. They are not just any balls, but balls made of a "thin, nearly transparent celluloid shell" (*schwache fast durchsichtige Celluloidhülle*).[235]

Within an otherwise realistically portrayed, urban domestic scene, the bachelor Blumfeld finds himself forced into a confrontation with a dynamic object, whose very material existence bears a metonymic reference to the animated substrate of cinematic illusion. In the literary text, however, the human figure is also permitted to interact with the filmic object in ways that exceed the simply visual illusion of self-movement in cinema. For one, the celluloid balls are tactile material things, whose visual movements can be subjected to reality testing: "Blumfeld greift in die Luft, um festzustellen, ob sie nicht etwa an irgendwelchen Fäden hängen, nein, sie bewegen sich ganz selbstständig.[236] His experimental interaction with the animated things proceeds further with Blumfeld succeeding in grabbing hold of one of the balls, only to be attacked and hit by the other. At the same time, the balls themselves are not only materialized, filmic entities but also a concrete manifestation of the sound-phantasms described in Rilke's and Polgar's texts. By literally *objectifying* the uncanny noise-disturbances of the urban environment,

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[235] Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, p. 234.

[236] Ibid., p. 233.

Kafka's text poses a direct connection and challenge to its reclusive protagonist, leading him to interact with the external lives and realities beyond the walls of his apartment. In Kafka's story, the animated thing is no longer the phantasm of the secluded neurasthenic but rather a real intrusion and interruption that breaks the spell of the protagonist's isolation. As Blumfeld himself reflects: "Es ist doch nicht ganz wertlos als ein unbeachteter Junggeselle nur im Geheimen zu leben, jetzt hat irgendjemand, gleichgültig wer, dieses Geheimnis gelüftet und ihm diese zwei komischen Bälle hereingeschickt."[237]

The full narrative and critical potential of these strange objects will be taken up in detail in the chapter that follows. To conclude the present discussion, I would simply like to stress the cinematic origins of Kafka's complex, literary representations of animated things. While his subsequent stories featuring similar objects—like "Der Kübelreiter" and, most famously, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters"—make no explicit reference to object-animation films, the unfinished "Blumfeld" fragment indeed initiates Kafka's broader literary experiments with representations of strangely animate things, suggesting the importance of cinematic animation for provoking new representational strategies within his modernist prose. In all of these stories, the narrative possibilities suggested by autonomously moving things occupy a central position in Kafka's literary imagination and open up new, fictional strategies for reflecting critically on modern social relations among humans and things. Following a rigorous discussion of such issues in Kafka's literary fictions, Chapter 4 will pick up the other thread, introduced here, of an emerging film aesthetics based on the transformed status of objects on the cinema screen. The film theory and experimental cinema of the 1920s, in particular, display a striking investment

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[237] Ibid.

in the aesthetic potential of animated, "living" things, first emphasized in the reception of film around 1910. Here, the writings and films of German, avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter will serve as the primary focus for an explication of the complex role of animation and things in 1920s cinema.

3

ON KAFKA'S THINGS:
Between Animation and Reification

Die Grenze zwischen dem Menschlichen
und der Dingwelt verwischt sich.

— Theodor W. Adorno

Between 1915 and 1917, Franz Kafka produced several stories involving animated objects. These include not only the famous, spool-of-thread-like creature Odradek from "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," but also a flying coal-bucket in "Der Kübelreiter," and a pair of bouncing, celluloid balls in "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle."[238] Individually, such texts have long been counted among the most enigmatic of Kafka's writings—due in no small part to these mysterious figures. Considered collectively, however, the same objects also come to exhibit striking similarities in terms of their narrative function. In all of the stories, the animated things appear suddenly to disrupt the isolated, domestic existence of the human protagonists and to draw them out into a wider world of social relations. The flying bucket delivers its impoverished rider to the home of the coal-dealer. The bouncing

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[238] Although first published in journals in 1919 and 1921, respectively, Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" and "Der Kübelreiter" were likely written only months apart during the first half of 1917. Kafka began work on the "Blumfeld" fragment in February 1915 and offered private readings of the draft as late as July 1916. The story became known under its current title only posthumously upon publication in the 1936 collection, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes: Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlaß*, edited by Max Brod. Further details on the dates of the three stories can be found in the commentary included in Franz Kafka, *Schriften, Tagebücher: Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Born et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1982ff.). Here, see the following volumes: *Drucke zu Lebzeiten: Apparatband*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Wolf Kittler et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1996), pp. 349 and 542–45; and *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I: Apparatband*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1993), pp. 75–77.

balls lead Blumfeld to interact with his neighbors. And Odradek poses a disturbing connection between the housefather and his future, familial generations. In each case, the animated thing plays an active role in mediating the estranged relations between human figures in the story.

While these curious objects—and Odradek in particular—have been the focus of extensive scholarly and theoretical discussions, their role as mediating agents in Kafka's narrative fictions has received little to no attention. As I will explore in close readings of the texts, Kafka's animated things function in various ways both as "living" extensions of particular human figures and as quasi-person- or animal-like entities in themselves, behaving as autonomous and unpredictable links between different characters in the stories. In their narrative roles, such objects are defined not only by their animated status but also their thing-like character. Although possessing an animated life, objects like Odradek, the flying bucket, and the celluloid balls in "Blumfeld" appear utterly useless and mysteriously broken-down, and prove stubbornly resistant to the intentions of humans. They are both animate creatures and crudely material constructions, living beings and yet undying things. For the reader as well as Kafka's protagonists, these strange figures pose the problem of blurring the usual distinction between an acting subject and an inert world of objects.

In the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, the animation of figures like Kafka's Odradek has been understood in dialectical relationship to the forces of reification. Informed by Marx's account of commodity fetishism as well as Georg Lukács's later theory of "reification" (*Verdinglichung*), Adorno reads the animated Odradek figure as a

sign of the alienated status of things under capitalism.[239] In his 1953 "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," Adorno goes further to describe not only how these strange objects come to occupy an estranged, "no-man's-land between human and thing" (*Niemandsland zwischen Mensch und Ding*), but also how Kafka's humans become aware of their thoroughly dehumanized and reified state.[240] Under the modern social conditions that Adorno sees reflected in Kafka writings, the falsely autonomous "life" of things as commodities coincides with the alienated and thing-like status of humans. The animation of Kafka's figures—be they human or thing—is due not to some inner subjectivity or volition, Adorno suggests. Rather, their dynamic movements are the result of some ubiquitous and external force, which throws them about as if they had fallen into "a magnetic field."[241]

For Adorno, the animation of objects in Kafka is thus inextricably and dialectically related to the reified status of social relations. While I agree that Kafka's animated things bear the marks of estrangement and distortion, such a reading also obscures the dynamic, narrative function of such objects in mediating social relations in Kafka's stories. In becoming animated, Kafka's things not only come to resemble his

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[239] For Adorno's reading of Odradek in terms of a "dialektisches Warenmotiv," see his letters of December 17, 1934 and August 2–4, 1935, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel: 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 92–93, 143, and, quoted here, p. 147. For the original, literary representation of Odradek, see Franz Kafka, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" [1919], in *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Wolf Kittler et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1994), pp. 282–84.

[240] Theodor W. Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka" [1953], in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 318 and, quoted above, p. 329.

[241] Ibid., p. 329: "Die Grenze zwischen dem Menschlichen und der Dingwelt verwischt sich. [...] [D]ie gebannten Menschen handeln nicht von sich aus, sondern als wäre ein jeglicher in ein magnetisches Feld geraten."

reified humans; they also take on subject-like roles in the narrative, behaving in a manner similar to Kafka's strangely dehumanized messenger and assistant figures. Like these human intermediaries, Kafka's animated things appear not simply as representatives of a distorted and reified world; they in fact constitute the very social relations that give shape to this world in Kafka's narrative fictions. Kafka's animated things, I would like to suggest, function as if to literalize the more relational aspect of Lukács's original (and roughly contemporaneous) 1923 definition of reification: "daß ein Verhältnis, eine Beziehung zwischen Personen den Charakter einer Dinghaftigkeit [...] erhält."[242] Yet in doing so, Kafka's animated things also exceed the structures of Marxist interpretation. By literalizing the thingly aspects of human relations, Kafka's stories succeed in representing the consequences of reification, while simultaneously exploring its limits and productively estranging the reader's more habituated understandings of social relations. In Kafka, as I will show, the animation of things tells the story of reification—but in surprising and open-ended ways.

In their innovative 1975 study, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari present a reading of Kafka's animated things in terms of reification, as well, but do so in an instructively different manner. Singling out Odradek and the bouncing balls in "Blumfeld" as specific examples, Deleuze and Guattari draw a distinction between the "animated" assemblages of Kafka's novels and the "reified" machines found in several of his stories. In contrast to the "living political and social assemblages" involved in *Der Process* and *Das Schloß*, for example, objects like

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[242] Georg Lukács, "Das Phänomen der Verdinglichung" [1923], in *Geschichte und Klassen-bewußtsein* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), p. 257.

Odradek and the celluloid balls, they argue, behave rather as strange and useless machines that remain, "too transcendental, too isolated and reified, and too abstract," to connect up to the dynamic, legal and bureaucratic assemblages of Kafka's longer writings.[243] While such machinelike objects are highly animated in themselves, their animation remains isolated and disjointed, and tied to a crude thing-like structure that appears at once broken-down and of unknowable purpose. For Deleuze and Guattari, these objects exist simply as reified elements within the otherwise dynamic, socio-political assemblages of Kafka's writing.

Within the schema of Deleuze and Guattari's overall reading, Kafka's animated things present an impasse of sorts. Figures like Odradek and the balls in the "Blumfeld" story seem to reassert the old, stubborn opposition between subject and object, and thus pose a stumbling block for the philosophers' immanent system of dynamic flows, lines of flight, and dismantling assemblages. In both their metaphysical and material excesses, such objects mark a point of failure, breakdown, or discontinuity in Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the assemblage, acting like some foreign obstruction that brings the machine to a halt. In other words, for Deleuze and Guattari, such animated figures in Kafka pose a problem not so much in their role as *objects* but rather in their disruptive capacity as *things*. This distinction, first mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation, will be discussed below in relation to Kafka's literary representations of animated things.

According to a distinction forwarded by the recent work of Bill Brown, Bruno Latour, and others, the word "thing" has come to denote a broad transformation or

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[243] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [1975], trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 39–40; see also pp. 47–48.

inversion in the status of objects: from a position of subservience in relation to the human subject, to a role of stubborn resistance and person-like agency. Whereas the "object" appears as some inert and neutral entity (which the subject perceives and represents, attributes meaning to and understands scientifically), the "thing" designates a figure of excess, unpredictability, and obstinate materiality, able to subvert the will and instrumental intentions of the human in moments of breakdown and failure. The object's innate tendency toward breakdown and unpredictability (its capacity to become *thing* in this emphatic sense) has been used in this fashion to theorize a supposed "agency" of technological artifacts, natural objects, and everyday things.[244] In language relevant to my reading of Kafka, Bruno Latour makes a related distinction between understanding the roles of things as "intermediaries" or in terms of "mediation." Considered as an intermediary, the thing is reduced to an object position, defined by its instrumental usage by a subject. In terms of mediation, however, the thing is granted an actor-like position, exceeding its intermediary role to become an active and unpredictable figure that is not only used by humans but also shapes their behavior and actions.[245]

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[244] On the distinction between object and thing, see Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): pp. 1–22. For different approaches to the "life" or "agency" of technical, aesthetic, and everyday objects, see, for example, Bruno Latour, "Where are the Missing Masses?: The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts" [1992], in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 229–54; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005); and *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone, 2004). The distinction between object and thing in Brown and Latour, in particular, is highly indebted to Martin Heidegger's analysis of objects and equipment found in *Sein und Zeit* [1927] (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), pp. 90–102.

[245] For a detailed account of Latour's conception of "mediation," see his chapter, "A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans: Following Daedalus's Labyrinth," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), pp. 174–215; and in the same

In recent years, critics and theorists have even enlisted Kafka's fictional writings as a relevant contribution toward the theorization of an autonomous "life" or "agency" of things. Art historian Peter Geimer, cultural and literary historian Hartmut Böhme, and social theorist Jane Bennett, for example, have all drawn on Kafka's complex literary representation of Odradek in "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" as a productive fiction for thinking through the materiality, alterity, and power of things.[246] In a recent article, Uwe C. Steiner has even suggested that Kafka's writings articulate a "knowledge of things" somehow congruent with current, theoretical claims about the "agency" and "quasi-subjectivity" of objects (such as found in the work of Latour and others).[247] In all of these cases, Kafka's literary representations have provided recent critics and theorists with an inspiration and model for articulating the power and complex materiality of things.

While I remain skeptical of any easy identification of Kafka's writings with current theoretical positions, I am interested in observing how, in these appropriations, Kafka's fictional representations have served to provoke and complicate reflections on a supposed life or agency of things. Much of the recent, social and cultural theory of this sort, I would argue, can be understood to take deliberate recourse to literary and narrative representations of animated things, treating them as heuristic fictions in the service of

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volume, the glossary entry, "Mediation vs. Intermediary," p. 307.

[246] See Peter Geimer, "Theorie der Gegenstände: 'Die Menschen sind nicht mehr unter sich'," in *Person/Schauplatz*, ed. Jörg Huber (Vienna: Springer, 2003), pp. 209–22, here p. 220; Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006), pp. 50–54; and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 6–8.

[247] See Uwe C. Steiner, "Widerstand im Gegenstand: Das literarische Wissen vom Ding am Beispiel Franz Kafkas," in *Literatur, Wissenschaft und Wissen seit der Epochenschwelle um 1800: Theorie – Epistemologie – komparatistische Fallstudien*, ed. Thomas Klinkert and Monika Neuhofer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 237–52.

new theoretical articulations. In contrast to literary scholars like Steiner and Böhme, or social theorists like Bennett, however, I do not wish to attribute some sort of heuristic potential or theoretical knowledge about things to Kafka's literary texts themselves. Rather, in discussing these theoretical appropriations, I instead want to assert the often-unacknowledged importance of fiction and narrative for the broader theoretical interest in objects and things. Looking beyond the appeal of the Odradek figure for recent social and cultural theory, the various animated things in Kafka's stories also display greater complexity when considered both collectively and within the specific context of the individual texts. In my close analysis of the stories, I will stress both the particular narrative functions of these animated figures within the diegetic space of their respective texts, as well as the reader's experience of the depicted objects, as mediated through Kafka's complex, literary representations. Throughout my readings, I aim to affirm the texts' experimental and open-ended nature, which, for better or for worse, has made Kafka's writings continually attractive for theoretical borrowing.

In situating a close reading of Kafka's animated things in relation to older, neo-Marxist theories of reification, on the one hand, and more recent debates about an "agency" and "life" of things, on the other, I have a number of goals in mind. First, by emphasizing the complex interplay between animation and reification in Kafka's literary representations, I hope to reassert a critical stance, which has been left out or actively rejected in current, theoretical discussions about things.[248] At the same time, by borrowing from the recent, popularized distinction between objects and things, as well as

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[248] See, for example, Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): pp. 225–48.

Bruno Latour's notion of things as unpredictable "mediators," I also hope to significantly challenge the staid, Marxist-inspired interpretations of figures like Odradek purely in terms of reification and commodity fetishism. Reading Kafka's fictions at the intersection of these distinct theoretical currents has the benefit of highlighting conflicting tendencies in the literary representations themselves, while also revealing the limitations and simplifications involved in such theoretical appropriations. The function of animation in Kafka's representation of things, as I will show, is not simply in the service of articulating a false or distorted relationship. The animation of things in Kafka does indeed tell a story of reification. But the story it also tells is (to quote Bill Brown): "the story of a changed relation to the human subject," that is, "the story of objects asserting themselves as things."[249]

While my reading has been largely provoked and motivated by these divergent theoretical appropriations and trends, I also want to be careful to consider the particular historical and cultural contexts of Kafka's writings. His fictions of animated things do not resemble fantastic worlds of fairy tales or fables, which are detached from points of immediate, historical reference. Rather, stories like "Der Kübelreiter," "Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle," and "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," are all situated within a particular world, characterized by urban housing, industry, and market relations, corresponding to concrete aspects of Kafka's work and home life in the early twentieth century. Within these specific contexts, Kafka's animated things are all the more interesting for their estranging effects and narrative functions. At the same time, these objects must also be understood in relation to other dominant themes in Kafka's writings such as familial

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[249] Brown, "Thing Theory," p. 4.

relations, religion, and the transcendence of law. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, reified objects like Odradek or the celluloid balls in "Blumfeld" display a marked affinity with the ossified and transcendental structures of guilt and unknowable authority found elsewhere in Kafka's writing.[250] In the conclusion of the chapter, I will speculate on this connection by looking closely at the mysterious appearance of moral imperatives in the stories, such as the commandment against killing found in "Der Kübelreiter" ("Du sollst nicht töten!") and the notion of "real or imaginary rights" (*wirkliche oder scheinbare Rechte*) which appears at the very end of the "Blumfeld" fragment.[251] Analyzing these stories alongside "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," I will argue that Kafka's literary representations of animated objects entail a complex reflection on notions of "mediation" (*Vermittlung*) and "responsibility" (*Verantwortung*).

Animated Things and Reified Humans

As many critics have noted, Kafka's "Der Kübelreiter" stands out among his writings for its direct connection to an immediate historical event: the coal shortage during Prague's

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[250] See Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, pp. 47–48, and 72. On this point, Deleuze and Guattari closely follow Walter Benjamin in associating Odradek with a primordial guilt and the court of law. See Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages" [1934], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 409–38, here, p. 431.

[251] See Franz Kafka, "Der Kübelreiter" [1921], in *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Wolf Kittler et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1994), pp. 444–47, quoted here, p. 444; and the "Blumfeld" fragment, in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1993), pp. 229–66, here, p. 266. Subsequent references to these *Kritische Ausgabe* volumes of Kafka's writings will appear parenthetically in the text according to the following abbreviations: *Drucke zu Lebzeiten* (*D*) and *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I* (*N I*).

severe winter of 1916/17.[252] As the story begins, the narrator describes the cold and unforgiving conditions of the time through a jarring and disjointed list:

> Verbraucht alle Kohle; leer der Kübel; sinnlos die Schaufel; Kälte atmend der Ofen; das Zimmer vollgeblasen von Frost; vor dem Fenster Bäume starr im Reif; der Himmel, ein silberner Schild gegen den, der von ihm Hilfe will. (*D*, 444)

The paratactic form of the story's opening corresponds well to the physical situation described. Beginning with the absence of heating fuel, the fragmentary sequence proceeds by enumerating the progressive consequences of this lack. The equipment for heating the room has become useless, the room frozen, the outer world a cold and unforgiving expanse. While the sequence thus establishes a degree of continuity—from the frigid interior to the external environment and icy indifference of the heavens—the same fragmentary list also articulates the disconnected existence of the various objects. In their frozen and functionless states, the bucket, shovel, stove, room, trees, and sky appear as radically isolated and detached—both with respect to one another and in relation to any human figure that might look for help under these unforgiving conditions.

The frozen stasis of the opening scene is only broken with the introduction of the story's animated object. Kafka's first-person narrator decides he must beg some coal of the wealthy coal-dealer in town or otherwise freeze to death. Since regular pleas to the coal-dealer no longer work, the narrator decides he must go before him as a beggar. This appeal as a beggar, however, depends strangely on the active role of narrator's coal-bucket. "Meine Auffahrt schon muß es entscheiden," he declares, "ich reite deshalb auf dem Kübel hin" (*D*, 444). The empty coal-bucket comes to life as a steed, its handle the

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[252] On this period in relation to Kafka's literary production, see Max Brod, *Über Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1974), p. 140.

bridle, and the narrator is swiftly flown through the frozen streets to the coal-dealer's home. In doing so, the animated thing breaks the spell of the frozen world and mediates a connection and interaction between the human characters. Through its dynamic flight-trajectory, as I will show, the animated bucket functions to translate the physical conditions of coldness in the story into a narrative fiction of reified, social relations.

In its capacity as a mediating agent, Kafka's flying coal-bucket takes on multiple functions within the narrative. First, in accordance with the narrator's intentions, the bucket serves not only as a means of physical transport to the coal-dealer's home but also as a visible sign of destitution and need. These two functions coincide in the emptiness of the bucket, as the narrator's own plea acknowledges: "bitte Kohlenhändler, gib mir ein wenig Kohle. Mein Kübel ist schon so leer, daß ich auf ihm reiten kann" (*D*, 445). Here, the repurposing of the object exceeds a purely, instrumental function and takes on a symbolic meaning within a social context. Roland Barthes notes a very similar dynamic in his 1964 essay, "Semantics of the Object": "in order to find absolutely improvised objects, we should have to proceed to completely asocial states; we can imagine that a tramp, for example, improvising footwear out of newspaper, produces a perfectly 'free' object; but even this is not so—very quickly, this newspaper will become precisely the *sign* of the bum."[253] In Kafka's story, the material lightness of the bucket also has unintended and uncontrollable consequences for the narrator and thus serves another function within the narrative. After failing to appeal to the coal-dealer directly, the flying "Kübelreiter" is confronted at the front door by the coal-dealer's wife, who succeeds in

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[253] Roland Barthes, "Semantics of the Object" [1964], in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), pp. 179–90, quoted here, p. 183 (emphasis in original).

driving him away with just a wave of her apron. As the narrator explains: "Alle Vorzüge eines guten Reittieres hat mein Kübel; Widerstandskraft hat er nicht; zu leicht ist er; eine Frauenschürze jagt ihm die Beine vom Boden" (*D*, 447). At the end of the story, the narrator is found having been blown far away to "die Regionen der Eisgebirge," never to be seen again (*D*, 447).

The physical trajectory of the flying bucket is shaped largely by contrasting temperatures in Kafka's story:

> Durch die fest gefrorene Gasse geht es in ebenmäßigem Trab; oft werde ich bis zur Höhe der ersten Stockwerke gehoben; niemals sinke ich bis zur Haustüre hinab. Und außergewöhnlich hoch schwebe ich vor dem Kellergewölbe des Händlers, in dem er tief unten an seinem Tischchen kauert und schreibt; um die übergroße Hitze abzulassen, hat er die Tür geöffnet. (*D*, 445)

As it carries its rider through the city streets, the flying bucket moves as if tracing out an isothermal path, travelling evenly along the frozen alleyways and lifted higher with the increased temperatures found along the fronts of the heated buildings. Reaching its destination, the bucket is buffeted even higher by the hot air pouring out of the coal-dealer's home. The narrator's intent to present his empty bucket as a visible sign of need is in fact thwarted by the object itself. The "Kübelreiter" fails to present himself visually to the coal-dealer, since his mount (in its lightness) is not only a sign of want but also an index of wasted heat. "Aber ich sitze doch hier auf dem Kübel," the narrator cries out from high above the coal-dealer's home, "bitte seht doch herauf; Ihr werdet mich gleich entdecken; um eine Schaufel voll bitte ich" (*D*, 446). Although the flying bucket draws the narrator along a line of dependence toward the coal-dealer's door, it also repels its rider from his ultimate goal. As an index of temperature, the empty bucket is also an

index of the narrator's dehumanized and devalued existence, pulling him along with the wasteful flow of disposable resources.

In tracing out these vectors of waste and want, the physical path of Kafka's flying bucket structures the story's narrative of reified, social relations. Although the animation of the bucket breaks the initial spell of the narrator's frozen room and establishes a dramatic, social connection between the narrator and the coal-dealer, it also reveals the cold, reified relations that exist between the two, and ultimately banishes the narrator to the cold expanses of the distant ice-mountains. For the coal-dealer, the narrator is just one extra "Kundschaft" to call out prices to (*D*, 446); for the dealer's wife, he is simply a "Nichts," whom she can quickly blow away like so much trash (*D*, 447). Without reducing Kafka's story to some crude Marxist interpretation regarding the alienated nature of commodity exchange, it is clear that a process of reification is central for an understanding of the "Kübelreiter." The figure corresponds to the crucial moment that Adorno recognizes in Kafka: "Der Augenblick des Einstands [...], auf den alles bei [Kafka] abzielt, ist der, da die Menschen dessen innewerden, daß sie kein Selbst – daß sie selbst Dinge sind."[254] The animated bucket thus not only reveals the reified relations between humans; it also literalizes the consequent, dehumanized state of the human, who is reduced to a disposable object. This reified existence is already suggested by the strange compound noun of the story's title: an absurd, hybrid creature that fuses human and thing. In Kafka's story, the animation of the thing is inseparable from the reified state of human relations.

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[254] Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," p. 318.

In critical readings of Kafka's "Der Kübelreiter," this dynamic interplay between animation and reification has been largely ignored. In recent interpretations, the bucket-rider figure is most often read as a meta-reflection on the author's creative yet isolated existence as a writer. Inspired largely by Kafka's own biographical struggles, such interpretations read the flight of the bucket in terms of a conflict between the lonely struggle of the artist (represented by the narrator) and the comfortable life of the bourgeois family (represented by the coal-dealer). The attempt to reconcile these two existences—an attempt enacted by the flight of the bucket—is shown to fail in the course of the story. In the end, the narrator is again left in cold solitude, continuing on in his creative flight of artistic fancy. In such readings, the ethereal lightness and endangered state of the "Kübelreiter" figure come to symbolize Kafka's own isolated yet imaginative life, which he struggled through as a bachelor artist.[255]

While the association of the bucket-flight with artistic imagination is plausible, such readings overlook the complex role of the animated thing itself, as well as its similarities with other such objects in Kafka's stories. As I have tried to demonstrate, the animated bucket takes on multiple functions as it traces out and reveals the forces of reification in the story. Initially a useless object, the bucket is repurposed in the narrative to serve as both a sign of the narrator's desperation and as a vehicle for provoking a confrontation between the human characters. In the end, this transformation into the

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[255] See, for example, Sabine Schindler, "Der Kübelreiter," in *Franz Kafka: Romane und Erzählungen*, ed. Michael Müller (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003), pp. 233–52, here pp. 245–49. In a more recent article, Alexander Honold reads Kafka's fantastic narrative as a "selbstreflexive Thematisierung des Schreibvorgangs," with the coal-bucket's flight standing as both representation and performance of the black pencil traces left on the page. See Honold, "Kafkas Trickster: Zum Auftritt des Fremden in der Schrift," in *Kafkas Institutionen*, ed. Arne Höcker and Oliver Simons (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), pp. 295–320, quoted here, p. 313.

ethereal and beggarly "Kübelreiter" is the narrator's undoing, and he himself is relegated to the status of a disposable thing. The ability to tell this story of reification hinges on the animation of the object, which powers the narrative reflection on human relations in the story.

As "Der Kübelreiter" clearly demonstrates, Kafka's animated things are not simply anomalous and fantastic figures; they also serve important, narrative functions within fictions that allude to real historical conditions (here, the domestic coal-shortage during World War I). What is so fascinating about Kafka's story is how, in relation to this historical context, the clearly absurd fiction of a flying bucket can produce an almost palpable sense of the physical coldness and reification of relations that characterized the period. While in the published version of the story, the ending suggests a lonely flight into the realm of artistic fantasy, Kafka's original conclusion is far less ambiguous. In a final paragraph crossed out in the notebook draft of the story, the narrator puts a decisive end to his flight: "Mein Reiten hat den Sinn verloren, ich bin abgestiegen und trage den Kübel auf der Achsel."[256] With a return to the normal use of the now-lifeless object, the narrative is brought to a close. As the crossed-out conclusion emphasizes, the animation of the thing was not part of some imaginative escapism, but was intended to have a purpose and meaning (*Sinn*). The complex function of the animated bucket in the story entails not only a meaning within the diegetic space of the text, as discussed above, but also a meaning for the reader, who is able to experience the consequences of reification in a compact, graphic, and visceral form.

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[256] Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I: Apparatband*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, p. 275.

While Kafka's "Der Kübelreiter" tells the story of a human transformed into a thing, the 1915 "Blumfeld" fragment tells the story of the limits and breakdown in treating others as things. Like "Der Kübelreiter," Kafka's "Blumfeld" story begins with an isolated protagonist confined to his apartment. And while, in both texts, the animated thing functions to disrupt this isolated existence and provoke broader, social interactions, the "Blumfeld" story proceeds according to a very different narrative structure.

Instead of tracing out a dynamic, narrative arc like the flying bucket, the bouncing, celluloid balls introduce an abstract configuration that is repeated in the course of Kafka's fragmentary story. Blumfeld's interactions with these strange, animated things come to bear a resemblance to his relations with human figures in the story. In this way, the animated thing introduces a pattern of reified, social relations that are in turn explicated according to the model of the animated balls. With their origins in the experiential realms of urban housing and early cinematic animation (as argued in Chapter 2), these strange objects also take on a socio-critical significance within the larger story, which explores the protagonist's relationships with his neighbors and employees at work. In resemblance to these human figures, the bouncing, celluloid balls present both a model of Blumfeld's objectifying treatment of others and a kind of "thingly" resistance to such treatment.

Kafka's "Blumfeld" story starts off innocently enough with the eponymous, elderly bachelor climbing the stairs to his lonely apartment after work and weighing the pros and cons of purchasing a dog for companionship. The appeal of owning the animal, he reflects, lies in its subservience to its master: its "Bellen, Springen, Händelekken" could be at his disposal when desired, while the animal could also be disposed of with a

kick or be left out in the street overnight (*N I*, 232). Blumfeld expects the impossible of a pet: that it be both independent and yet entirely under his will and control. What he despises above all is the thought of some dependent creature, or "untergeordnetes lebendiges Wesen," requiring his constant maintenance and care (*N I*, 231). The organic life of the animal is the primary drawback for Blumfeld. Dogs get filthy, attract parasites, dirty apartments, and require care when they get sickly and age (*N I*, 230–31). Due to his egocentrism and compulsive cleanliness, Blumfeld desires the mechanical subservience of the pet without any of its bodily limitations or needs.[257]

When Blumfeld opens the front door to his apartment his wish is ironically granted with the strange appearance of the two celluloid balls. Instead of barks, jumps, and hand-licks they offer their bouncing and a strange rattling noise, and they will even spin around in Blumfeld's hand when caught (*N I*, 232–34).[258] It is as if he were presented with an abstract, mechanical model of a dog, stripped of all of its inherent biological limitations. Blumfeld even nervously speculates that the balls might continue their strange, animated life when broken down into pieces (*N I*, 238). Things might be destroyed of course, but unlike animals they can never become injured or die.

Thus abstracted into thingly form, the balls seem a material realization of Blumfeld's ideal pet. And yet they also make a total mockery of his expectations.

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[257] In their close reading of the story, I.A. and J.J. White stress the moral failings of intolerance and egocentrism as characteristic of Blumfeld's attitude toward other humans and animals alike. See their article, "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor," in *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Times*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), pp. 354–66.

[258] As Clayton Koelb has argued, the balls ("Bälle springen") serve as a replacement for the dog ("Bellen, Springen") on a phonetic level, as well (*N I*, p. 232). See Koelb, *Kafka's Rhetoric: The Passion of Reading* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989), p. 36.

> Wie untergeordnete Begleiter, suchen sie es zu vermeiden, vor Blumfeld sich aufzuhalten. Bis jetzt haben sie es scheinbar nur gewagt, um sich ihm vorzustellen, jetzt aber haben sie bereits ihren Dienst angetreten. (*N I*, 235)

While initially appearing to enter into his service, the celluloid balls develop an increasingly autonomous life, at first mimicking Blumfeld's movements and then actively rebelling against his control. As the evening progresses, Blumfeld even finds himself having to care for the unruly balls as if they were a pampered dog: "Es ist als hätte er einen kleinen Hund, den er weich betten will" (*N I*, 240). Even as an abstract, thingly approximation of a dog, the animated balls still assert the stubborn as well as dependent existence of a real, living creature.

In this first episode of Kafka's fragmentary story, the animated objects serve as both a materialized model for Blumfeld's objectifying and instrumental desires, as well as a narrative device for challenging and frustrating these very same expectations. At the same time, Blumfeld's frustrating interactions with the balls find him returning to his usual, instrumental disposition toward living things: "Jetzt könnte Blumfeld einen Hund gut brauchen, so ein junges wildes Tier würde mit den Bällen bald fertig werden; [...] es ist leicht möglich, daß sich Blumfeld in nächster Zeit einen Hund anschafft" (*N I*, 237). Without a dog on hand, however, the next morning he decides on his maid's ten-year-old son as a means of ridding himself of the celluloid balls. The strange, animated objects thus provoke Blumfeld to engage with a wider circle of neighbors whom he otherwise avoids. The young boy proves too dense to understand Blumfeld's instructions for retrieving the balls in his apartment, so he reluctantly enlists the two daughters of his building's "Hausmeister" to take the key to his wardrobe where the balls have been captured. The decision initiates a proliferation of mediating figures that are required to

realize Blumfeld's goal of passing on the troublesome objects to the young boy. He must first use the girls, who must retrieve his apartment key from the boy's mother (the maid) in order to retrieve the balls for the boy from Blumfeld's locked wardrobe. On the girls' part, they recognize they must themselves use the boy as a means of accessing the mysterious objects:

> „Wir werden ihm die Bälle holen", rufen da die Mädchen. Sie sind schlau, sie haben erkannt, daß sie die Bälle nur durch irgendeine Vermittlung des Jungen erhalten können, daß sie aber auch noch diese Vermittlung selbst bewerkstelligen müssen. (*N I*, 251)

The repeated usage of the term "mediation" (*Vermittlung*) already points to an internal tension in the term when applied to a human figure: the sense of both an autonomous agent, who serves as a go-between, versus the purely instrumental treatment of the human as a means to an end.

In a recent article, Timothy J. Attanucci characterizes the chain of instrumental relations in Kafka's "Blumfeld" as inherently parasitic.[259] In contrast to familial relations (denied to the elderly bachelor), Blumfeld's social interactions develop in the story according to a proliferation of parasitic figures that try to realize their goals by latching onto others. The figure of the dog introduces and underscores this theme of the parasite in the text: first, Blumfeld frets about a dog bringing in fleas ("die ständigen Begleiter der Hunde" (*N I*, 230)); then, there are the strangely dependent and dog-like balls (themselves parasitic "Begleiter" of Blumfeld); and finally, the double-ball figure initiates a sequence of similar figures, including the Hausmeister's daughters and

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[259] See Timothy J. Attanucci, "Kafka: Junggeselle – Maschine. Überlegungen zu einer historischen Kopplung," in *Literarische 'Junggesellen-Maschinen' und die Ästhetik der Neutralisierung*, ed. Annette Runde (Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2011), pp. 169–85.

Blumfeld's assistants at work, who appear in multiples to latch on to other figures in the story. As Attanucci argues, this parasitism is also reciprocated on the part of the bachelor. (As Kafka himself states in a 1910 diary entry: "[der Junggeselle] kann nur als Einsiedler oder als Schmarotzer leben."[260]) With his orderly and hermetic life disrupted by the strange appearance of the celluloid balls, Blumfeld becomes suddenly dependent on his neighbors. Finding himself in possession of a toy-like object that he can neither enjoy himself nor pass on to his own child, he is forced to initiate a string of instrumental and parasitic relations in order to achieve something quite easily done within the social structures of the family: handing down possessions to the next generation.[261]

This analysis of parasitism in "Blumfeld" identifies an important aspect of Kafka's representation of social relations, but it is only one side to the story. The role of the celluloid balls as Blumfeld's "Lebensbegleiter" (*N I*, 248) poses the problem not only of parasitic relations, but also a notion of extended personhood. As Kafka's narrative makes clear, Blumfeld's main anxiety with respect to these strange animated things is that they somehow be taken as directly connected to or somehow representative of him: "Solange [die Bälle] hinter ihm her waren, konnte man sie für etwas zu ihm Gehöriges halten, für etwas, das bei Beurteilung seiner Person irgendwie mit herangezogen werden

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[260] Kafka, *Tagebücher*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), p. 125.

[261] See Attanucci, "Kafka: Junggeselle – Maschine," pp. 177–80. Attanucci draws here on Michel Serres's distinction between the genealogical tree-structure of familial relations and the cascading reproduction-schema of parasitic chains. See Serres, *The Parasite* [1980], trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007). As Adorno notes, the parasitism of Kafka's figures in general is displaced from the oppressive power of the patriarch to impotent and superfluous bachelor figures, like Gregor Samsa, who are parasitic both in their domestic lives and in their jobs, which lack a dimension of socially useful work. As a middle manager in a forgotten department of a textile factory, Blumfeld's parasitism likewise straddles the spheres of home and work. See Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," p. 318–19.

mußte" (*N I*, 247). Like unruly children, the seemingly impudent and rebellious behavior of the celluloid balls would reflect poorly on their owner, Blumfeld thinks. And it is for this reason that he must restore them to their "proper place" (*eigentliche Bestimmung*) in the games of children (*N I*, 247). Passing the balls on to his maid's son would both terminate this incriminating ownership as well as sever his parent-like relation to the objects, thus restoring Blumfeld to his orderly and isolated, bachelor existence.

The existence of the celluloid balls as both uncontrollable, "living" extensions and dependent parasites contrasts strongly with Blumfeld's desired instrumental relations with things. As technological objects, the bouncing balls can be read, I would argue, as embodying a tension similar to Bruno Latour's contrast between intermediaries and mediation. On the one hand, they present an abstract, technological model for Blumfeld's desired instrumental and objectified relationship to others (in the first case, a dog, who would serve as a means-to-an-end for Blumfeld). On the other hand, the celluloid balls also mark a breakdown and challenge to such expectations by becoming rebellious, stubborn, and uncontrollable in relation to human intentions. Their strange animation transforms an instrumental object into an obstinate thing, an inert intermediary into a mediating agent. What appear first as dependent parasites are also thingly extensions that implicate and entangle individuals in a larger network of social relations. In terms similar to Latour, the theme of "Vermittlung" introduced in the first half of the story (see the block quote above), nicely encapsulates this tension between a treatment of others as objects or intermediaries and the open-ended suggestion that such a treatment can also be resisted and ultimately fail.

This general dynamic, introduced by Blumfeld's interactions with the celluloid balls, is repeated throughout the story in analogous, triangular configurations: first the Hausmeister's two daughters (who "bounce around" Blumfeld (*herumspringen*) (*N I*, 249)); followed by the two childlike "apprentices" (*Praktikanten*) at his workplace, who make mechanical movements like the bouncing balls, "skipping" (*auf den Fußspitzen hüpfend*) about Blumfeld's office (*N I*, 264). The configuration is repeated as well in a passage later crossed out in the draft of the story. Here it appears as a *mise en abyme* in which Blumfeld contemplates a magazine photograph depicting the 1914 meeting of French President Raymond Poincaré and Czar Nicholas II (both accompanied by two attendants a piece) in St. Petersburg shortly before the outbreak of World War I.[262]

In all of these episodes, a fantasy of instrumental control on the part of Blumfeld is undermined by a proliferation of uncontrollable, mediating agents that resist their objectified and reified treatment. Most dramatic in this sense is the extended workplace episode in the second half of the story, where Blumfeld's middle-management position in a textile factory has him plagued by the insubordinate behavior of his two childlike assistants. Replaying the parent-child problematic in terms of a "new generation" (*Nachwuchs*) in the workplace (*N I*, 255), these assistant figures pose a similarly insurmountable challenge to Blumfeld's desire for instrumental relations with others as independent extensions of his will. Contrast, for example, the assistants' unruly behavior with Blumfeld's vision of hierarchical authority, order, and control:

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[262] On the historical source of this photograph as well as the function of photography in Kafka's critical reflections on this historical event, see Carolin Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), here, pp. 207–19; as well as her earlier article, "Snapshots of History: Franz Kafka's 'Blumfeld ein älterer Junggeselle' and the First World War," *Modern Austrian Literature* 39.1 (2006): pp. 29–43.

> Ursprünglich hatte [Blumfeld] sich vorgestellt, daß die Praktikanten ihn in den unmittelbaren Handreichungen unterstützen würden, welche zur Zeit der Warenverteilung so viel Anstrengung und Wachsamkeit erforderten. Er hatte gedacht er würde etwa in der Mitte hinter dem Pult stehn, immer die Übersicht über alles behalten und die Eintragungen besorgen, während die Praktikanten nach seinem Befehl hin und her laufen und alles verteilen würden. Er hatte sich vorgestellt, daß seine Beaufsichtigung, die so scharf sie war, für ein solches Gedränge nicht genügen konnte, durch die Aufmerksamkeit der Praktikanten ergänzt werden würde und daß diese Praktikanten allmählich Erfahrungen sammeln, nicht in jeder Einzelheit auf seine Befehle angewiesen bleiben und endlich selbst lernen würden, die Näherinnen, was Warenbedarf und Vertrauenswürdigkeit anlangt, von einender zu unterscheiden. (*N I*, 259)

Instead of conforming to Blumfeld's instrumental vision, the assistants replicate the uncontrollable and resistant behavior of the celluloid balls. Whether in the workplace, in the domestic setting, or even in the international, political arena staged in the magazine photograph, the dynamic behavior of these animated things functions both to model and assert a limit to the reification and instrumentality of relations.

In Carolin Duttlinger's close analysis of the Poincaré and Nicholas II photograph in the "Blumfeld" fragment, she rightly emphasizes the unnerving and uncanny effects of the doubled figures in the image—the mirrored sets of two "attendants" (*Begleiter*) standing behind both the French President and the Russian Czar—and reads this constellation in terms of a de-individualization, loss of control, and specter of military uniformity in relation to World War I.[263] Considering the entire story, however, the proliferation of these doubled figures marks not only a destabilizing crisis, but also an open-ended challenge to hierarchical and instrumental relations. The uncannily doubled attendants in the photograph are unnerving not only as subordinate duplicates of their

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[263] See Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography*, p. 214. For the relevant passage, crossed out in the draft of the story, see Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I: Apparatband*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, pp. 205-7, here p. 206: "Hinter dem Kaiser wie hinter dem Pr[äsident] stehn je zwei Herren. Gegenüber den freudigen Gesichter des Ka[isers] und des P[räsidents] sind die Gesichter der Begleiter sehr ernst, die Blicke jeder Begleitgruppe vereinigen sich auf ihrem Herrscher."

superiors, but also—like the celluloid balls, the Hausmeister's daughters, and Blumfeld's own assistants—because they suggest a stubborn resistance and limit to instrumental control. The destabilizing challenge of Kafka's story is that all of these multiplying, subordinate figures (whether human, animal, or thing) are also asserting some form of autonomous existence and resistance. In an ominous and uncertain manner, the fragmentary story breaks off with a demand for protecting the "real or imaginary rights" (*ihre wirklichen oder scheinbaren Rechte*) of these subordinate figures (*N I*, 266).

The concrete references in "Blumfeld" to a crucial, historical moment in the photograph as well as real, factory work-conditions (which Kafka knew firsthand from the safety inspections he performed as a civil servant for the *Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt für das Königreich Böhmen in Prag*[264]) suggest the complicated role of animated things in Kafka's fictions. As with the flying bucket in "Der Kübelreiter," the celluloid balls are not simply fantastical figures within the diegetic space of the text; they are also part of a complex, literary representation that alludes to a particular historical context. Given these extra-textual references, Kafka's fictions of animated things deserve to be read not only in terms of their narrative function but also as a critical response to historical events and conditions. Kafka's literary representations of animated things in particular, I would argue, can be read as an imaginative response and resistance to the dehumanizing and reifying forces at work in the world he observed.

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[264] On Kafka's legal and administrative duties in relation to factory safety, see documentation and articles collected in Hans-Gerd Koch et al. (eds.), *Kafkas Fabriken*, *Marbacher Magazin* 100 (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2002). As Attanucci notes, Kafka's representation of Blumfeld's particular department (*Heimarbeit*), as an increasingly marginalized yet still growing part of the textile industry, is historically accurate. See Attanucci, "Kafka: Junggeselle – Maschine," p. 179, note 27.

The particular irony of Kafka's "Blumfeld" story is that this challenge to objectified and reified relations arises out of the very thing-like quality of the story's proliferating doubles. Like the "assistants" (*Gehilfen*) in Kafka's *Das Schloß*, the mechanical apprentices in "Blumfeld" give the uncanny impression that they might not be truly alive.[265] In Blumfeld's treatment of the figures as instrumental intermediaries, they appear as entirely objectified and dehumanized. Yet in this reified state, they also exhibit a degree of humanity, paradoxically, by asserting a form of thing-like resistance, becoming uncontrollable and unpredictable in their mediating roles. For related reasons, perhaps, Walter Benjamin would later describe Kafka's strangely liminal assistant and messenger figures as undermining any sense of order and hierarchy and as representing a limited sense of hope in Kafka's fictions.[266] In such representations of reified humans, Adorno would also recognize a limited form of social resistance. In Kafka's dehumanized worlds, he writes: "Der Bann von Verdinglichung soll gebrochen werden, indem das Subjekt sich selbst verdinglicht."[267]

What my readings have hopefully demonstrated is how the limits of reification in Kafka's representations of humans are also inextricably tied to his fictional animation of things. On the one hand, Kafka's fictions of animated things tell the story of humans

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[265] Cf. Kafka, *Das Schloß*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1982), p. 371: "es genügte auch dieser nicht sehr appetitliche Gehilfe, dieses Fleisch, das manchmal den Eindruck machte, als sei es nicht recht lebendig." In a possible, intertextual reference to the animated things in "Blumfeld" and "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," Kafka's *Das Schloß* describes the same assistants as curling up together in a corner to resemble "a large, tangled ball" (*ein großes Knäuel*) (p. 73).

[266] See Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.2, pp. 414–15.

[267] Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," p. 340.

being treated as objects. On the other hand, the story of objects asserting themselves as animated things also coincides with the story of reified humans asserting themselves through thingly resistance. Where the flying bucket in "Der Kübelreiter" fails in this sense, the unruly, celluloid balls in the "Blumfeld" story become a replicating model of subordinate figures stubbornly defending their rights.

The Case of Odradek

The Marxist concept of reification (*Verdinglichung*) was first popularized in the mid 1920s following the publication of Georg Lukács's 1923 collection, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*. Derived in part from Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Lukács's notion of reification indicates, broadly speaking, the situation in which a relationship between people has taken on the character of a thing—whether that pertains to the objectification and alienation of human labor in the form of a commodity; the instrumental treatment of other humans as mere things; or even the objectification of one's own abilities as a profitable resource. In the historical context of 1920s Germany, the concept of reification took on a particular currency for critiquing the pervading conditions of a cold and calculating purposefulness in social relations, which arose during this period of economic crisis, inflation, and extreme unemployment.[268]

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[268] For a brief overview and historical contextualization of Lukács's theory of reification, see Axel Honneth, *Verdinglichung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 11–28; as well as Martin Jay's introduction to the English translation, Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, ed. Martin Jay (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 3–13. On the broader culture of "coldness" during the Weimar period, see Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

Franz Kafka died in 1924 and did not live to see most of the political, cultural, and social upheavals of the Weimar period, nor its nightmarish end. But when his novels and other writings began appearing in posthumous publications between 1925 and 1931, Kafka's work found a renewed interest and especially astute reception among a number of German-Jewish intellectuals now commonly associated with the Frankfurt School, namely: Adorno, Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer. For such readers of the 1920s and early 30s, Kafka's literary fictions appeared not only as a keen, historical observation of the dehumanization and rationalization of the modern world, but also as a literary ally in the critical analysis of the present.[269] In a 1931 review of Kafka's posthumously collected stories, for example, Kracauer reads the wall-and-hole-like structures found in "Der Bau" and "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" as representations of the distorted products of instrumental reason: reified structures that serve only to blind and imprison.[270] For Benjamin and Adorno, the short text, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," collected in Kafka's *Ein Landarzt* from 1919/20, also took on a particular significance. In their contrasting readings of the story, the strange, spool-of-thread-like creature named Odradek becomes symptomatic and metonymic of a broader, "thingly alienation" (*dingliche Entfremdung*) within modernity.[271]

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[269] For a concise reconstruction of this particular reception history of Kafka in the 1920s and 30s, see Tobias Wilke, "Tückische Objekte: Dinglichkeit und Repräsentation bei Kafka," *Colloquia Germanica: Internationale Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 37 (2004): pp. 51–72, here, p. 51.

[270] See Siegfried Kracauer, "Franz Kafka" [1931], in *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 256–68: "Also ist unsere Welt ein Ort der Unfreiheit, und wir schuften an einem Gebäude, das uns den Ausblick verbaut. Es ließe sich denken, daß Kafka bei der Beschreibung der Maulwurfshöhle jene menschlichen Organisationen vorgeschwebt hätten, deren Triumphe Schützengräben, Drahtverhaue und weitverzweigte Finanzprojekte sind" (p. 259).

The context for these readings was a lively debate that Adorno and Benjamin carried out through letters in the mid-1930s. While the immediate concern was Adorno's critical response to Benjamin's 1935 draft of the exposé, "Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts," for his ongoing *Passagen-Werk*, the letters touch on their respective understandings of dialectical structures and commodity fetishism, and enlist Kafka's Odradek as a particularly useful figure for thinking through such issues. The authors' respective readings of this strange figure—a bizarre hybrid of person and thing, a meaningless though animated assemblage, and an uncanny object of obsessive concern—not only shed light on Benjamin and Adorno's differing conceptions of the distorted status of things in modernity, but also suggest the irreducible complexities of Kafka's text itself, which ultimately resists and subverts any easy appropriation into theories of commodity fetishism and reification.

This strange, animated object had already been discussed at length in Benjamin's 1934 essay on Kafka. As Benjamin formulates it here: "Odradek ist die Form, die die Dinge in der Vergessenheit annehmen. Sie sind entstellt. Entstellt ist die 'Sorge des Hausvaters,' von der niemand weiß, was sie ist."[272] In his well-known reading of the story, the figure of Odradek is significant for its association with a nameless guilt and the postponement of judgment. For Benjamin, Odradek is one of the many "discarded, forgotten objects" (*ausrangierte, vergessene Effekte*), which remain hidden in the liminal spaces of domestic life: material things, which, although tucked away in attics or under staircases, will never completely disappear and thus preserve a lasting sense of the

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[271] For this particular construction, see Adorno's letter from December 17, 1934, in Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, p. 91.

[272] Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.2, p. 431.

remnants of the past.[273] Benjamin's use of "Vergessenheit," here, cannot simply refer to forgetting, since it is the housefather's recurring encounters with Odradek that account for his unknown concerns, cares, or worries (*Sorge*). As David Kaufmann suggests, this "Vergessenheit" should rather be located somewhere between the "forgetting of guilt" and the "guilt of forgetfulness," both of which are recalled by the thing's repeated appearances.[274] This, and not simple forgetting, is Benjamin's strategy for understanding the damaged and estranged relationship between people and things that Kafka's text represents. In Benjamin's reading, Odradek thus functions as a receptacle of a guilt that is the cause of its distorted form. This form, however, has its origins not in the thing itself, but rather in the distorted concerns and worries of a housefather, whose unknown guilt is able to transfigure even the most insignificant, domestic object into a marker of neglected responsibility and uncertain fate.

Adorno was well familiar with Benjamin's Kafka essay and provided critical feedback on the text in an extensive letter from December 1934. Here, Adorno already critiques Benjamin's reading of Odradek for regressively assuming some original, undistorted relationship between human and thing, which might be reclaimed.[275] When he wrote to Benjamin again in early August 1935 to comment on the *Passagen-Werk* exposé, Adorno returned to Odradek in order to draw a new connection between Kafka's

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[273] Ibid. For a wide-ranging discussion and categorization of related objects in Western literature, including Odradek, see Francesco Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures* [1993], trans. Gabriel Pihas and Daniel Seidel (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2006), here, p. 280.

[274] See David Kaufmann, "Beyond Use, Within Reason: Adorno, Benjamin and the Question of Theology," *New German Critique* 83 (2001): pp. 151–73, quoted here, pp. 157–58.

[275] See Adorno's December 17, 1934 letter in Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 89–96, here, pp. 92–93.

figure and the structure of the commodity form, and, at the same time, to critique Benjamin's insufficiently dialectical understanding of commodity fetishism. Interpreted in terms of the commodity fetish, Odradek's distortion could not be due to the housefather's "Sorge," as it was in Benjamin's reading. Rather, as Adorno reminds Benjamin, the thing's own structure as commodity is what produces the distorted consciousness of the human.[276] Read in terms of the Marxist opposition between use-value and exchange-value, however, Odradek also takes on a special status within Adorno's critique. In its apparently useless state, Odradek becomes an instance of an absolute commodity: the "nutzlos überlebende Ware."[277] Holding to his dialectical method to the bitter end, Adorno is forced to acknowledge a surprising flipside to his reading: that in a totally reified world, the utterly alienated and useless Odradek is also a figure of transcendence and immortality. Sounding somewhat like Benjamin in his privileging of the obsolete object, Adorno describes this as, "die Rettung der Dinge; derer, die nicht länger in den Schuldzusammenhang verflochten, die untauschbar, unnütz sind."[278]

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[276] See Adorno's August 2–4, 1935 letter, in *Briefwechsel*, p. 139: "Der Fetischcharakter der Ware ist keine Tatsache des Bewußtseins sondern dialektisch in dem eminenten Sinne, daß er Bewußtsein produziert."

[277] Ibid., p. 143.

[278] Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," p. 341. In his August 1935 letter to Benjamin, Adorno describes this as the "entscheidende Erkenntnischarakter" of Kafka's Odradek. See, here, Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel,* p. 143; and see also, p. 142: "Ware ist einerseits das Entfremdete, an dem der Gebrauchswert abstirbt, andererseits aber das Überlebende, das fremd geworden die Unmittelbarkeit übersteht. An den Waren, nicht unmittelbar für die Menschen haben wir das Versprechen der Unsterblichkeit." In Adorno's earlier December 1934 letter to Benjamin, Odradek is already identified as a "Motiv des Transzendierens" and "Aufhebung des Todes," but it was not until later (in a penciled-in addition to the letter) that Adorno ascribes this characteristic to the structure of commodities. See *Briefwechsel*, p. 93; and notes on the letter, p. 462. For an

Turning to Kafka's short text itself, even a cursory reading of "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" immediately calls into question the validity of both Benjamin's and Adorno's interpretations. If Odradek were indeed distorted, as Benjamin claims, this implies that the thing had an original state that had become somehow altered. Kafka's text, however, denies this very possibility, or at least denies the possibility of ever knowing if Odradek had an original, undistorted form:

> Man wäre versucht zu glauben, dieses Gebilde hätte früher irgendeine zweckmäßige Form gehabt und jetzt sei es nur zerbrochen. Dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein; wenigstens findet sich kein Anzeichen dafür; nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen, die auf etwas Derartiges hinweisen würden; das Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen. (*D*, 283)

Adorno's reading of Odradek as a "nutzlos überlebende Ware" is similarly suspicious, in that is presupposes an exchange value that would make the thing a commodity. But Odradek appears worthless through and through. More importantly, it also has no discernible, prior use that would even give it exchange value in the first place. Clearly, the housefather could not even give away the thing if he tried.

As Tobias Wilke has convincingly argued, Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" consistently undermines any interpretive schema designed to make sense of the strange Odradek figure.[279] Binary oppositions like Benjamin's distorted/undistorted or Adorno's use-value/exchange-value not only fail in the ways discussed above. The text itself also stages a variety of other methodological approaches to understanding the object, all of

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insightful reconstruction that triangulates Adorno and Benjamin's readings of Kafka with the theological influence of Gershom Scholem on these same debates, see Kaufmann, "Beyond Use, Within Reason: Adorno, Benjamin and the Question of Theology."

[279] See Wilke, "Tückische Objekte: Dinglichkeit und Repräsentation bei Kafka." My preceding presentation of Adorno's and Benjamin's respective interpretations of the text is indebted to Wilke's own careful reconstruction. In what follows, I draw on other points from his detailed analysis of Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" before marking a point of departure in my own reading of the story.

which are ultimately frustrated and deemed insufficient. In the first paragraph of the text, the linguistic, etymological approach to the name Odradek leads only to "uncertainty" (*Unsicherheit*) and an utter lack of any true "meaning of the word" (*Sinn des Wortes*) (*D*, 282). This is followed by a detailed description of the object's appearance and material structure. Yet the exacting, objective description is also persistently undermined and blurred by a language of appearances and indeterminacy: "Es sieht *zunächst* aus *wie* eine flache sternartige Zwirnspule, und tatsächlich *scheint* es auch mit Zwirn bezogen [...]" (*D*, 282; emphasis added). Finally, as the strange animated life of Odradek is gradually revealed, the narrator describes attempts of interpersonal dialogue with the thing, but this elicits only circular and indefinite responses: "'Wie heißt du denn?' fragt man ihn. 'Odradek,' sagt er. 'Und wo wohnst du?' 'Unbestimmter Wohnsitz,' sagt er und lacht" (*D*, 284).

The title of Kafka's short text, as Wilke argues, underlines its hermeneutic structure on multiple levels.[280] "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" is at once the title of a unique textual object, the overall theme of the story, and a reference to the particular object of concern (named Odradek) represented in the text. The story both represents and itself enacts an investigation into what this "Sorge" might be, while at the same time problematizing any sense of a stable and definitive meaning, both within the diegetic space of the story as well as on a meta-fictional level in relation to the reader's interpretation of the text. Like the Odradek figure, which retains its utter strangeness and

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[280] On the following points, see Wilke, "Tückische Objekte," pp. 54–56, here, p. 54: "Dass die Erzählung einen Prozess hermeneutischer Anstrengung thematisiert, geht dabei bereits aus ihrem Titel hervor, der das reflexive Verhältnis benennt, ohne indes den Gegenstand der Reflexion oder 'Sorge' näher zu bezeichnen."

otherness throughout the story, Kafka's short text itself appears to be, "sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen" (*D*, 283). The importance of Kafka's text, according to Wilke, is thus not the meaning of the Odradek figure itself, but rather how the attempt at constructing meaning—as both staged in the text and provoked in the reader—is in fact mediated and reflected through a narrating subject.[281]

In both Adorno and Benjamin's readings, the primary dynamic represented in Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" is that of reification. In Adorno's reading, it is the transcendent reification of a thing so useless and estranged that it has escaped from the use/exchange structure of the commodity. For Benjamin, reification in Kafka's story occurs as a kind of second nature of distorted relations to things arising out of a state of "Vergessenheit." In this sense, Benjamin's reading of Odradek resonates well with Adorno's famous formulation in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*: "Alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen."[282] If there is any lasting importance of the concept of reification for a reading of Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," I would argue, it must be brought into a more dynamic interplay with the narrative function of animation in the story. In this way, the undeniable effect of an estranged thinghood, which is so palpable in the story, can be better situated in terms of the open-ended and imaginative animation of the thing, which is mediated through Kafka's narrative fiction.

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[281] Ibid., p. 54: "In Kafkas Text [steht] nicht die objektive Beschaffenheit oder 'Bedeutung' Odradeks zur Debatte, sondern dessen Vermittlung durch ein erzählendes Subjekt."

[282] Theodor W. Adorno [and Max Horkheimer], *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* [1947], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 263. The formulation is undoubtedly Adorno's, originating in a February 29, 1940 letter to Benjamin. See *Briefwechsel*, p. 417.

To understand the strange animation of Kafka's Odradek, however, the fiction of an animated life of things must first be disassociated from its usual function in Marxist theory. In Marx's famous section on "Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis" in *Das Kapital*, most notably, the fiction of an animated, acrobatic table is intended to illustrate the inverted and false relationship to objects-of-use as soon as they are produced as commodities for profitable exchange:

> sobald [der Tisch] *als Ware* auftritt, verwandelt er sich in ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding. Er steht nicht nur mit seinen Füßen auf dem Boden, sondern er stellt sich allen andren Waren gegenüber auf den Kopf, und entwickelt aus seinem Holzkopf Grillen, viel wunderlicher, als wenn er aus freien Stücken zu tanzen begänne.[283]

In general, Marx's strange language of fetishism, spiritualism, and mysticism in relation to the commodity form is intended—in an Enlightenment manner—as a strategy of disillusionment. To treat commodities as if they had some autonomous "life" apart from human labor is, for Marx, a falsehood to be critically dissected and eventually corrected through revolution. For Lukács—who did his best to ignore and obscure this strange language in Marx—the notion of a "life" of things was situated differently (on the side of use-value) as a supposedly "immediate character of things as things" (*unmittelbarer Dingcharakter aller Dinge*), whose "außerökonomisches *Leben*" revealed itself in moments of crisis for the usual rules of reified thinking.[284] In both cases (though on

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[283] Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [1867] (Vienna: Verlag für Literatur und Politik, 1932), p. 76 (emphasis in original).

[284] Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, pp. 267 and 281 (emphasis added). The latter quote reads in full: "Das qualitative Sein der 'Dinge,' das als unbegriffenes und ausgeschaltetes Ding an sich, als Gebrauchswert sein außerökonomisches Leben führt, das man während des normalen Funktionierens der ökonomischen Gesetze ruhig vernachlässigen zu können meint, wird in den Krisen plötzlich (plötzlich für das verdinglichte, rationelle Denken) zum ausschlaggebenden Faktor" (p. 281).

opposing sides), the notion of a "life" of things in Marxism functions to mark a distinction similar to the Kantian opposition between appearance (*Erscheinung*) and thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*).

In Benjamin and Adorno's respective readings of Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," the strange animation of the Odradek figure (though not directly commented upon) functions in a roughly similar manner: as a mark of distinction between a primary thingness of things and their distorted or alienated appearance. In what follows, I would like to suggest that a better way of understanding the strange, animated life of Odradek is not in terms of distortion but rather as a productive and open-ended, "heuristic fiction."[285] In this way, the autonomous and animated "life" of the thing can be considered not as a marker of false appearances (as it is in Marx) or as an unmediated substantiality of things as things (as in Lukács), but rather as a deliberate fiction for estranging and rediscovering our everyday relations to the world of objects.

In my reading of Kafka's things, animation is thus not considered as merely a sign or expression of reification. Rather, the two terms are involved in a dynamic interplay of movements and counter-movements—between becoming animated and becoming thing-

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[285] The notion of "heuristische Fiktionen," although originating in Kant's First Critique (A771/B799), is best known in the context of Hans Vaihinger's popular 1911 work, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*. Here, Vaihinger develops a defense of theoretically untrue or incorrect ideas, which, despite their falsity, have significant value and practical use. Suggestively, Vaihinger refers to "personifikative Fiktionen" as "der eigentliche bestimmende Faktor in der Kategorie des 'Dinges,'" since we often treat the objective reality of things as if some interior personality, soul, or force were at work. See Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob: System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen der Menschheit auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus* [1911], 4th ed. (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1920), here, p. 50. Interestingly, in an autobiographical sketch on the origins of this philosophical study (included in an early English translation), Vaihinger mentions discussing the 1879 novel *Auch Einer* with its author Friedrich Theodor Vischer: the novel responsible for popularizing the German phrase, "die Tücke des Objekts." See Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As if"*, trans. C.K. Ogden, 2nd ed. (London: Cox & Wyman, 1935), p. xxxix, note 2.

like—that develop over the course of the story. The animation of Odradek is not some fixed characteristic; rather, it unfolds progressively in Kafka's narrative fiction. The animation of Odradek tells the story of an object asserting itself as a thing (to borrow Bill Brown's phrase), but in a way that both marks an estrangement, distortion, and reification of relations, as well as an increased awareness of the material entanglements and power of everyday things in the lives of humans. It is a story, that is to say, of both thingification and animation at the very same time. In this way, reification does not become a totalizing state or force, but rather a critical reminder of the tendencies toward ossified and un-reflected relations.

In describing animation as a heuristic fiction, this is not to say that specific, literary figures like Kafka's Odradek lead one to discover the nature of some inherent "life" of things (whether that is conceived as the false life of the commodity, a non-reified life of things as things, or in terms of more recent theories of a material agency of things). In agreement with Wilke's analysis, I would stress rather how Kafka's representation of Odradek problematizes any sense of a meaning or essential nature of the animated thing. At the same time, however, the self-reflexive textual representation of Odradek exists not as some static, indecipherable object, but rather as an indeterminate, narrative construction that develops over time and suggests open temporal and spatial horizons. In addition to its role in the domestic context of the story's setting, Odradek is also explicitly presented to the reader as a thing whose life extends beyond its immediate association with the housefather into temporal expanses of the past and distant future, spatial reaches outside the home, as well as to broad scholarly debates on the thing's origin. Imagining this extensional life of the thing, I would argue, involves a kind of

artificial animism based in fictional narrative. While Kafka's literary texts are far more complex, the use of narrative, fictional constructions links Kafka's animation of objects to recent theoretical writings on the life and agency of things. Although little discussed in itself, Latour, Bennett, Brown, and others have not only taken deliberate recourse to fictional representations (like Kafka's Odradek, for example), but also developed their own imaginary narratives in developing their respective, theoretical accounts of things. After analyzing the progressive, narrative animation of Odradek in Kafka's short story, I will show, in the next section, how imaginative narrative constructions have been employed as heuristic fictions in recent theoretical writings.

"*Am Anfang war das Wort*." The story of Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" begins as if in deliberate parody of the Gospel of John. But rather than the mysterious word "Odradek" becoming animated flesh, Kafka's story immediately rescinds the primacy of the word and instead asserts the word's origin in the material object: "Natürlich würde sich niemand mit solchen Studien [i.e. studies of the word's origin] beschäftigen, wenn es nicht wirklich ein Wesen gäbe, das Odradek heißt" (*D*, 282). The account of Odradek that immediately follows (quoted above) reads like a close, objective description of one of those odd yet familiar objects that find their way into the family junk-drawer. As Kafka's text goes on, however, the familiar quality of this spool-of-thread-like thing becomes increasingly blurred. Odradek seems at first to be just some makeshift spool for storing leftover thread, yet it begins to take on a bizarre hybrid quality. It is, the reader learns, quite literally anthropomorphic:

> Es ist aber nicht nur eine Spule, sondern aus der Mitte des Sternes kommt ein kleines Querstäbchen hervor und an dieses Stäbchen fügt sich dann im rechten Winkel noch eines. Mit Hilfe dieses letzteren Stäbchens auf der einen Seite, und

> einer der Ausstrahlungen des Sternes auf der anderen Seite, kann das Ganze *wie auf zwei Beinen aufrecht stehen*. (*D*, 283, emphasis added)

And as the text proceeds, the thing is also personified on a linguistic level with the initially neutral pronoun "it" (*es*), used in referring to Odradek, quickly replaced by the masculine "he" (*er*). Odradek is even reported to speak in a limited sense and produce an uncanny sound similar to laughter: "es ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann. Es klingt etwa so, wie das Rascheln in gefallenen Blättern. [...]; oft ist er lange stumm, wie das Holz, das er zu sein scheint" (*D*, 284).

Considered in terms of a narrative development, Odradek's animated and anthropomorphic existence thus progresses from a word to a thingly construction to a living creature, while, all along, the story consistently undercuts this animated state by reasserting Odradek's inert, material existence as some mundane and domestic, wooden object. Odradek is presented as a household thing very much disremembered and distorted, as in Benjamin's reading. And yet throughout, the text works with and against this reified state of the object to reanimate its presence in the minds of both the reader and narrator. Animation in this sense is not some static mark of distortion, but rather a narratively constructed technique of estrangement, with the overall effect of transforming an otherwise disregarded object into a substantial, thingly presence.

Animation in Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" also functions in an additional way, which relates the story closely to "Der Kübelreiter" and the "Blumfeld" fragment. As the reader learns, "Odradek [ist] außerordentlich beweglich und nicht zu fangen," and therefore prevents any closer scrutiny or meaningful understanding (*D*, 283). Thus, in a very literal sense, animation—understood here as *movement*—further undermines the possibility of fixing any meaning to the thing. At the same time, however, this literal

animation also resituates the significance of the object away from its mysterious nature and to its active role in mediating relations between human figures. The story concludes, in fact, with the rather troubling notion that Odradek's uncanny life outside of its immediate relations with the housefather might implicate and entangle him in other relationships extending both spatially and temporally.

First, being autonomously animate, Odradek can be found all about the housefather's apartment building and beyond:

> Er hält sich abwechselnd auf dem Dachboden, im Treppenhaus, auf den Gängen, im Flur auf. Manchmal ist er monatelang nicht zu sehen; da ist er wohl in andere Häuser übersiedelt; doch kehrt er dann unweigerlich wieder in unser Haus zurück. (*D*, 283)

Second, being not only animate but also a thing, Odradek not only connects the housefather with the external spaces and lives of his immediate, human neighbors; the undying creature also connects the narrator, through time, to his future relations:

> Vergeblich frage ich mich, was mit ihm geschehen wird. Kann er denn sterben? Alles, was stirbt, hat vorher eine Art Ziel, eine Art Tätigkeit gehabt und daran hat es sich zerrieben; das trifft bei Odradek nicht zu. Sollte er also einstmals etwa noch vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskinder mit nachschleifendem Zwirnsfaden die Treppe hinunterkollern? Es schadet ja offenbar niemandem; aber die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche. (*D*, 284)

In the concluding paragraph of the story, Adorno's notion of Odradek's transcendent reification is shown to coincide with an animation of human relations, which are mediated by the undying thing. Rather than simply escaping the tyranny of the family (as in Benjamin's reading) or the tyranny of use as commodity (as in Adorno's)—as an utterly reified thing—the animated Odradek also functions to generate and problematize human relations extending over time and space.

The "Sorge" of the housefather, announced by the title, thus might be best understood as a concern over the object's fate and its unpredictable role in mediating the housefather's relations with his neighbors and future, familial generations. The strange object is obviously of some personal significance, but the real concern here is how this personal attachment might be implicated and reflected out among broader associations. The real significance of the animated thing is not what it might mean in itself, but rather how it serves as an undying nexus for the preservation and generation of human, social relations. The dynamic interplay of animation and reification in the story brings out these movements and counter-movements between the forgetting and ossifying of relations and their estrangement and reanimation.

Animistic Fictions

Despite—or very much because of—the problematization of meaning in Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," critics and scholars have insisted on interpretive strategies that attempt to stabilize the Odradek figure according to allegorical readings or to anchor it to some external, historical reference. In the large body of secondary criticism on the text, there is to be found: symbolic interpretations of the star-shaped Odradek as a sign of Kafka's Jewishness or Jewish tradition in general; Marxist readings that take the text as an allegory for alienated life under capitalism; meta-fictional readings of Odradek as a cipher for a particular work of Kafka's or even the author himself; and even detailed etymological studies of the word Odradek, despite the text's explicit prohibition on such approaches.[286] Or, for two examples from more recent trends in German literary studies:

a media-historical reading of Odradek as an electromagnetic spool used in early wireless telegraphy; and a cultural-historical study linking Kafka to occultism, where Odradek is interpreted as akin to spiritualist devices (*Psychographen*) used for communicating with the dead (something like the pointer device (*Planchette*) used on Ouija boards).[287]

In recent years, Kafka's short text has also found a different kind of reception with little interest in adding on to this already long list of interpretations. A number of scholarly readers have recently revisited Kafka's Odradek figure not with the aim of determining what it *means*, but rather of exploring what it might *do*. That is, how Kafka's literary imagination might help to complicate and transform our understanding of objects and things, as well as their complex roles in relation to humans. The German, cultural and literary studies Professor, Hartmut Böhme, for example, has recently integrated Kafka's Odradek into a wide-ranging reassessment of the roles of the fetish and fetishism in modern culture. Böhme argues, that despite our intellectual adherence to forms of modern rationality, the behavior and actions of modern-day humans betray a persistent belief in the autonomous power and agency of nonhuman things. Within the context of his larger

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[286] On these last two readings, see most notably, Malcolm Pasley, "Drei literarische Mystifikationen Kafkas," in *Kafka-Symposion*, ed. Jürgen Born et al. (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 1966), pp. 21–37, here pp. 26–31; and Werner Hamacher, "The Gesture in the Name: On Benjamin and Kafka," in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), pp. 294–336, here pp. 318–27. The connection between Odradek and a specifically modern, Jewish "Desorientiertheitsgefühl" can be found in the earliest review of the story. See Felix Weltsch, "Bedeutende literarische Neuerscheinungen," *Selbstwehr* (December 19, 1919), collected in *Franz Kafka: Kritik und Rezeption zu seinen Lebzeiten, 1912–1924*, ed. Jürgen Born (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), pp. 101–2. For an overview of other early, interpretive strategies, see Heinz Hillman, "Das Sorgenkind Odradek," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 86.2 (1967): pp. 197–210.

[287] See, respectively, Wolf Kittler, "Schreibmaschinen, Sprechmaschinen: Effekte technischer Medien im Werk Franz Kafkas," in *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr*, ed. Wolf Kittler and Gerhard Neumann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1990), pp. 75–163, here pp. 157–60; and Andreas B. Kilcher, "Geisterschrift: Kafkas Spiritismus," in *Schrift und Zeit in Franz Kafkas Oktavheften*, ed. Caspar Battegay et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), pp. 223–44, here pp. 242–44.

argument, Kafka's complex, literary representation of Odradek serves as a primary resource for addressing our paradoxical relationship to things: our ability to assess them in a rational and detached manner, on the one hand, and yet the undeniable hold they have over our behavior and thoughts, on the other. For Böhme, as well, Odradek provides a model for articulating the irreducible entanglement of crude materiality and animating spirit—characteristic of the fetish-object—in language that is more complex than casual anthropomorphism. In Böhme's appropriation of Kafka's text, it is thus not a matter of interpretation, but rather of putting the literary text to work in the service of inciting and complicating theoretical reflection.[288]

Likewise, we find Odradek again in a recent book by political theorist Jane Bennett, titled *Vibrant Matter*. Odradek serves here as a kind of prototype for developing a theory of the active, social roles and vitalistic materiality of nonhumans in what Bennett calls a "political ecology of things."[289] Yet another example can be found in an article by German art-historian Peter Geimer, titled simply "Theorie der Gegenstände," in which Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" stands alongside the theoretical work of thinkers like Heidegger, Baudrillard, Latour, and Vilém Flusser as a primary reflection on the uncanny persistence and temporality of things. In other words: that uncomfortable knowledge we have, that even our most intimate, thingly attachments and possessions will, like

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[288] See Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur*, here pp. 50–54.

[289] See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, here pp. 6–8. For Bennett's related appropriations of Kafka, see her earlier articles, "The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32.3 (June 2004): pp. 347–72; and "Kafka, Genealogy, and the Spiritualization of Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 56.3 (August 1994): pp. 650–70.

Odradek, still be hanging out somewhere or other, long after we are dead and gone.[290] And perhaps most ambitiously, J. Hillis Miller, in a very recent article, makes explicit "use" of Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," as a "thought experiment" or "way of thinking" about things, which might help resituate ecological thinking from an organicist to a technological model.[291] In all of these instances, it is the strange, hybrid and irreducible status of Odradek, as well as the experimental and open-ended structure of Kafka's complex representations, that make "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" such a powerful text for estranging our habitual relations to objects and rediscovering them anew in their active roles as things.[292]

In a more general sense, recent social, cultural, and anthropological theory has explicitly employed what might be termed an *animistic imaginary* as a deliberate heuristic strategy for resituating methodological approaches to understanding the roles of objects and things. In the study of the "social lives" of commodities for example, an innovative collection of essays edited and introduced by Arjun Appadurai declares the need for a "methodological fetishism" in order to understand the concrete, historical roles (or "biographies") of circulating commodities, rather than considering them as inert and

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[290] See Geimer, "Theorie der Gegenstände," pp. 209–22.

[291] See J. Hillis Miller, "Ecotechnics," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change,* vol. 1, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 65–103, quoted here p. 66.

[292] The apparent use or uselessness of Kafka's writings was, interestingly enough, a key issue in Benjamin's 1934 discussions with Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, who found much of Kafka to be "Geheimniskrämerei," would no doubt be surprised to know that one of the most enigmatic and ostensibly useless figures in Kafka would find such direct appropriation and social-theoretical application. See Benjamin, "Gespräche mit Brecht: Svendborger Notizen" [1934], in *Versuche über Brecht*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), pp. 121–23, quoted here p. 122.

mute objects to which meaning is externally attributed.[293] Here, the animation of the commodity is taken up not as a critical gesture to dispel false beliefs (as in Marx), but rather as a productive fiction for generating new knowledge about the social roles of things. In the realm of visual art, W.J.T. Mitchell and social anthropologist Alfred Gell have both forwarded theoretical approaches that consider the potential for art-objects to embody person-like lives, actions, or desires (while acknowledging that, in a strict sense, this is also a fiction).[294] In the context of "Actor-Network-Theory," Bruno Latour even makes explicit the productive potential of the specifically literary arts for contributing to an understanding of the social agency of things:

> the resource of fiction can bring—through the use of counterfactual history, thought experiment, and 'scientification'—the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense. Here again, sociologists have a lot to learn from artists.[295]

My interest here is not to champion or subscribe to any of these contemporary theoretical developments or methodologies, but rather to observe their recourse to literary fictions—and animistic ones, in particular—for generating new knowledge in different fields of research. Latour, as an incredibly playful, literary, and self-reflective writer himself, demonstrates further the specific power of fictional narrative for both estranging

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[293] See Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 3–63, here p. 5. In addition to Appadurai's introductory essay, see also, in the same volume, Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," pp. 64–94.

[294] See Gell, *Art and Agency*; and Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* In reference to the obvious animism of his book's title, Mitchell stresses the heuristic potential of the fiction, remarking: "I want to proceed as if the question were worth asking, partly as a kind of thought experiment, simply to see what happens, and partly out of a conviction that this is a question we are already asking, that we cannot help but ask, and that therefore deserves analysis" (p. 30).

[295] Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 82.

and clarifying the everyday roles of things. Writing under a pseudonym in the pages of the reputable and long-standing, sociological journal, *Social Problems*, Latour develops a narrative, literary strategy for articulating the thingly existence of what we take to be objects. His goal is to develop a more general language to talk about the social agency of nonhumans in a sociological context, but he starts with a very simple object as his example—a door-hinge—and through counterfactual, subjunctive, and narrative structures, succeeds in transforming this humble object into a full-blown thing. "Walls are a nice invention," Latour writes,

> but if there were no holes in them, there would be no way to get in or out; they would be mausoleums or tombs. The problem is that, if you make holes in the walls, anything and anyone can get in and out (bears, visitors, dust, rats, noise). So architects invented this hybrid: a hole-wall, often called a *door*, which, although common enough, has always struck me as a miracle of technology. The cleverness of the invention hinges upon the hinge-pin: instead of driving a hole through the walls with a sledge hammer or a pick, you simply gently push the door. (I am supposing here that the lock has not been invented; this would over-complicate the already highly complex story of the door). Furthermore, and here is the real trick, once you have passed through the door, you do not have to find trowel and cement to rebuild the wall you have just destroyed; you simply push the door gently back [...].
>
> So, to size up the work done by hinges, you simply have to imagine that every time you want to get in or out of the building you have to do the same work as a prisoner trying to escape or a gangster trying to rob a bank, plus the work of those who rebuild either the prison's or the bank's walls.[296]

Latour's story of the door-hinge certainly does not match the complexity of Kafka's literary writings. But the combination of an exact yet playful description of a banal, material object and its construction, alongside a seemingly simple situation transformed into a Sisyphean task, does indeed resemble aspects of Kafka's own great stories of walls and holes, like "Der Bau" and "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer." In

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[296] Bruno Latour [as Jim Johnson], "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer," *Social Problems* 35.3 (June 1988): pp. 298–310, here pp. 298–99 (emphasis in original).

contrast to the static, reified structures identified in Kracauer's reading of these same texts, this intertextual comparison with Latour emphasizes the potential of Kafka's fictions to estrange and reanimate our understandings of material objects, leading to surprising discoveries about their significant roles in relation to humans.

Situating this one "story" of a familiar but disregarded object (the door-hinge) next to Odradek, it is perhaps easier to understand the appeal and function of Kafka's writings, and fictional narrative in general, within recent theoretical accounts of a life and agency of things. Such theories require a degree of rhetorical estrangement in order to challenge habitual understandings of the traditional hierarchical relationship between subjects and objects, humans and things. While the bizarre, thingly "life" of Odradek remains decidedly a fiction, theorists like Jane Bennett have taken the story as a "literary dramatization" of "nonorganic life," helpful for heightening one's awareness of the hybrid existence and ecological effects of all manner of technological, chemical, and waste objects, which extend well beyond our own temporal and spatial horizons.[297] While I have my own criticisms of the affirmative politics and nostalgic dimension of much of the recent theoretical work on a "life of things" (which will be addressed in the conclusion of the dissertation), such appropriations do provide compelling evidence of the irreducible, experimental, and open-ended nature of Kafka's literary animations. While the inherent estrangement of animation has its own particular functions within Kafka's own narratives, the fiction of living things has also taken on a broad, heuristic

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[297] See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, quoted here, p. 7.

role in recent attempts to newly situate humans in an increasingly complex and technologically animated world.[298]

A Responsibility for Things

The comparison between Franz Kafka's fictions and the methodological animism at work in recent social, cultural, and anthropological theory requires some additional commentary and qualification. As David Kaufmann reminds the reader: while Kafka has been pulled in many interpretive and appropriative directions, his intellectual coordinates are decidedly not some stylish paganism, but rather situated in relation to the monotheistic structures of Judaic thought and belief.[299] Kafka's own reflections, however, also display a subtle sympathy and unique understanding of animistic thinking, which deserves closer inspection. Suggestively enough, Kafka's consideration of such issues can be located in notebook writings that roughly coincide with his work on "Blumfeld," "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," and "Der Kübelreiter," between 1915 and 1917.

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[298] Interesting in this regard, to give a more commonplace example, is a recent *New York Times* Op-Ed on the surveillance capabilities of so-called "smartphones." Quoted in the Op-Ed is Columbia University Law Professor Eben Moglen, who employs a highly fictional language of anthropomorphism, animism, and hybridity to arrive at a better intuitive understanding of what these electronic devices truly are and do: "Smartphones see everything, they're aware of our position, our relationship to other human beings and other robots, they mediate an information stream around us." "They are robots for which we—the proud owners—are merely the hands and feet." See Peter Maass and Megha Rajagopalan, "That's No Phone. That's My Tracker," *New York Times* (July 13, 2012).

[299] This point is made in Kaufmann's critical review of Roberto Calasso's introductory text included in the Michael Hofmann translation of Kafka's *Zürau Aphorisms*. See David Kaufmann, "Kafka in the Countryside," *Forward* (September 8, 2006).

In a series of journal entries from June 1916, Kafka took down detailed notes on the various creation myths of "primitive" peoples that he found described in *Das Werden des Gottesglaubens* by Swedish cleric and anthropologist Nathan Söderblom. Through Söderblom's popular 1916 study—a book reviewed favorably in Kafka's journal as, "ganz wissenschaftlich ohne persönliche oder religiöse Teilnahme"[300]—he would have been well acquainted with then-recent, anthropological theories on "primitive" belief systems and the origins of religion, as well as the associated critiques and reformulations of E. B. Tylor's famous, nineteenth-century concept of animism by the likes of Wilhelm Wundt, Émile Durkheim, and others.

In Söderblom's own account of the development of religious beliefs, Tylor's theory of animism is defended against critics (Durkheim most notably) and reassessed as a still valuable explanation for some of the earliest forms of religious life. Söderblom not only considers animism as the earliest, evolutionary stage in the development of modern monotheistic religions, and draws comparisons between "primitive" animism and modern religions, but also follows contemporaneous anthropologists of the Oxford School in arguing that animistic thinking be understood as the first step toward human self-consciousness and a knowledge of the self as, "eine denkende, wollende, handelnde persönliche Einheit."[301] For Söderblom, the recognition of an animating, intentional life of things coincides with a related recognition of one's own animating spirit. In contrast to Tylor, however, Söderblom rejects a strict theory of souls to account for animistic beliefs,

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[300] See Kafka, *Tagebücher*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, p. 787.

[301] See Nathan Söderblom, *Das Werden des Gottesglaubens: Untersuchungen über die Anfänge der Religion* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1916), here p. 29.

whereby a belief in the spirits or souls of things originates by analogy with the belief in a human soul. Instead, he suggests a far looser conception of animism to include all forms of thinking that perceive the world of external objects as animated and living, as personified and anthropomorphized, regardless of whether these objects are considered to be inhabited by spirits or souls.

While Söderblom holds to a certain evolutionary model of religion, he is far more interested in emphasizing the lasting connections between modern religion and earlier beliefs, rather than denigrating the supposedly primitive. As Ritchie Robertson explains, Söderblom can be considered alongside the better-known, contemporaneous work of Rudolf Otto and Gershom Scholem as part of a reaction against the rationalist interpretation of religion and for a foundation of religion in the immediacy of experience common to mystics and "primitive" peoples. As Robertson notes: "Reading [Söderblom] would strengthen Kafka's conviction that the religious impulse was innate in human nature and increase his interest in primitive manifestations of it. One of the Zürau aphorisms says, rather wistfully: 'Was ist fröhlicher als der Glaube an einen Hausgott!'"[302]

While I would hesitate to identify the worrisome Odradek with this cheerful "Hausgott," Kafka's interest in "primitive" religious beliefs, I would argue, has an important relevance for his stories about animated things. Two years after reading Söderblom's book, Kafka would compose his own anthropological fiction to account for

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[302] See Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 244–47, here p. 245. For the quotation of Kafka, see, "Aphorismus 68" [1918], in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992), p. 128.

the origin of beliefs in the power of things over humans. As another of the so-called Zürau aphorisms—collectively published by Max Brod in the posthumous 1931 volume, *Betrachtungen über Sünde, Hoffnung, Leid und den wahren Weg*—this short text fits in well with the vaguely theological themes of the collection as a whole. But while Kafka's reference is specifically to the Old Testament polemic against idolatry, his exact account of "the first worship of idols" (*die erste Götzenanbetung*) is flexible enough to describe a more general relationship to things and not just the worship of manmade objects or images in the likeness of deities:

> Die erste Götzenanbetung war gewiß Angst vor den Dingen, aber damit zusammenhängend Angst vor der Notwendigkeit der Dinge und damit zusammenhängend Angst vor der Verantwortung für die Dinge. So ungeheuer erschien diese Verantwortung daß man sie nicht einmal einem einzigen Außermenschlichen aufzuerlegen wagte, denn auch durch Vermittlung bloß eines Wesens wäre die menschliche Verantwortung noch nicht genug erleichtert worden, der Verkehr mit nur einem Wesen wäre noch allzusehr von Verantwortung befleckt gewesen, deshalb gab man jedem Ding die Verantwortung für sich selbst, mehr noch, man gab diesen Dingen auch noch eine verhältnismäßige Verantwortung für den Menschen.[303]

Kafka's dense and enigmatic account of the origin of idolatry presents a complex constellation of concepts, which, considered more generally, provide the structure for an animistic thinking, in which "things" (*Dinge*) are attributed an active "responsibility" (*Verantwortung*) for the state of the world. In contrast to anthropological theories on the origins of animism, Kafka's short text offers no ætiological argument to account for the animation and anthropomorphization of things in early religions (e.g. the conception of a human soul derived from the experiences of dreams and death, which is then projected onto nonhumans). Instead, his anthropological fiction presents a constellation of "interconnected" (*zusammenhängend*) concepts that emerge out of a primal fear or

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[303] Kafka, "Aphorismus 92" [Spring 1918], in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, p. 134.

anxiety: "Angst vor den Dingen," "Angst vor der Notwendigkeit der Dinge," and "Angst vor der Verantwortung für die Dinge." As in Söderblom's treatment of animism, Kafka offers no underlying theory to explain the beliefs he describes, i.e. how fear results in the personification of things as bearers of responsibility. More important is the formulation of coincident and multiplying responsibilities shared by humans and things.

By crossing out the "mediation" (*Vermittlung*) of a single "außermenschliches Wesen" or monotheistic God, Kafka's short text effectively suspends the structure of responsibility between an absolute and oppressive responsibility of the individual human, on the one hand, and a complex, multiplying notion of a shared responsibility distributed throughout the world of things, on the other. Kafka's original draft of the text is even less ambiguous on this point. With two extra sentences (later removed), the text quoted above instead begins, "Durch Auferlegung einer allzu großen oder vielmehr aller Verantwortung erdrückst Du Dich," and concludes with the sentence: "Man konnte sich nicht genug tun in der Schaffung von Gegengewichten, diese naive Welt war die komplicierteste die es jemals gab, ihre Naivität lebte sich ausschließlich in der brutalen Konsequenz aus."[304] Kafka's text does not affirm a monotheistic structure of responsibility before God, as some have argued,[305] but rather situates a notion of responsibility somewhere between the absolute oppression of the individual and the brutal and naïve world of animism.

Interestingly, in Kafka's narrative fictions of animated things, we do not find a relinquishing of human responsibility and its attribution to things, as suggested in the

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[304] Ibid., p. 79.

[305] See Kaufmann, "Kafka in the Countryside."

aphorism. Rather, as I have argued, the same theme of "mediation" (*Vermittlung*) asserts itself in such animated objects and in fact raises the stakes of human responsibility. Kafka's fictions of animated things are in fact accompanied by moral imperatives like the commandment against killing in "Der Kübelreiter" ("Du sollst nicht töten!" (*D*, 444)), the assertion of the "rights" (*Rechte*) of subordinate figures in "Blumfeld," and the specter of an unknowable guilt in "Die Sorge des Hausvaters." Kafka's strange, animated things, I would like to suggest, take up a mediating role similar to the "außermenschliches Wesen" in the aphorism, but manifest their demands on human responsibility in a miniaturized, multiplied, and particularized manner.[306] In Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka, they are explicit in comparing the animated things of Odradek and the celluloid balls in "Blumfeld" to the transcendental structures of law and absolute authority found elsewhere in Kafka.[307] Perhaps, like some strange representatives of the law, these animated things proliferate in Kafka's writings in order to place demands on humans and hold them accountable for their actions.

The structure of a crossed out religious authority might also be related to the suspension of familial patriarchy in the stories. The complex mediating roles of animated things in "Blumfeld" and "Der Kübelreiter" arise in absence of more traditional structures of familial reliance. The social isolation of the two bachelor protagonists, that is to say, forces them to enter into complex and conflicted, social negotiations with nonrelatives in

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[306] In relation to Bruno Latour's theory of the "nonmodern," we might consider here how Kafka fictions of animated things similarly relocate the work of "mediation" (*Vermittlung*) from the heavenly margins and place it center stage in the daily interactions among humans and things. Cf. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

[307] See Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, pp. 47 and 72.

order to achieve goals that would be easily managed within the typical bourgeois family (i.e. handing down property to the next generation in "Blumfeld" and maintaining a heated home in "Der Kübelreiter"). Rather than an absolute responsibility in relation to one's father or children, the stories depict webs of distributed and mediated responsibility among various human and thingly figures, which proliferate beyond the confines of the home. The Odradek figure in "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," by contrast, seems to embody the very structures of patriarchal responsibility and carry them down through familial generations. In all of these cases, one would have to critique the strongly male-dominated sense of responsibility in Kafka's writings and identify the roles allocated to the stories' female characters, who serve mainly to intervene and interfere in male relations (as in the coal-dealer's wife in "Der Kübelreiter" and the two daughters of the Hausmeister in "Blumfeld").[308] As materializations of mediated relations and responsibility, the animated objects in Kafka's three stories cannot be so easily disassociated from these complex issues of religious authority, familial relations, and gender difference.

As various scholars have reconstructed, the specific theme of responsibility was central for Kafka's literary production during this period. He even intended to publish "Der Kübelreiter" and "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" (along with other texts that would end up in *Ein Landarzt*) in a collection titled "Verantwortung."[309] By looking closely at

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[308] For a critique of gender difference in Kafka's "Blumfeld," see Annette Runtes, "(Ver-) Gabe des Geschlechts: Junggesellentum und Schrift in Kafkas 'Blumfeld'-Fragment," in *Lesarten der Geschlechterdifferenz: Studien zur Literatur der Moderne* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005), pp. 143–74.

[309] See Robert Kauf, "*Verantwortung*: The Theme of Kafka's *Landarzt* Cycle," *Modern Language Quarterly* 33.4 (December 1972): pp. 420–32; and Malcolm Pasley, "Kafka and the Theme of 'Berufung'," *Oxford German Studies* 9 (1978): pp. 139–49.

Kafka's stories of animated objects, I hope to have suggested how this theme of responsibility intersects and is asserted by the active mediating roles of objects. While the structures of reification in Kafka's stories show how the treatment of things as objects tends to bleed over into the treatment of humans as things, the narrative function of animation counters such structures by asserting both the resistance of things as things and humans as humans.[310] The point is not that Kafka's stories have anything definitive to say about a theory of things or our ethical treatment of others, but rather that these stories provoke powerful reflections on such issues and raise the open-ended challenge of a greater responsibility in social relations.

[310] On the ethics of this interrelationship, considered from a philosophical point of view, see Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000). For a related discussion situated with respect to wider, literary representations, see Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010).

4

AVANT-GARDE ANIMATIONS:
Hans Richter, Rhythm, and the Cinematic Lives of Things

> *[D]er Film [ist] das erste Kunstmittel, das in der Lage ist zu zeigen, wie die Materie dem Menschen mitspielt.*
>
> — Walter Benjamin

With his programmatic 1929 book *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen*, German filmmaker and avant-garde artist Hans Richter took comprehensive stock of cinema's technical "means" (*Mittel*) of representation as well as its potential for the production of artistic films or "*Filmpoesie*." Published in coordination with the Deutsche Werkbund's famous 1929 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart, Richter's book lays out an ambitious project of educating filmgoers on the basics of cinematic techniques, with the aim of generating demand for higher quality artistic films and broad protest against the commercial offerings of the film-industry. Numerous filmstrips and stills are reproduced in the large-format book in order to heighten the reader's awareness of the new and unfamiliar experiences that could be realized in cinema—through camera and optical tricks, editing and printing practices. Sensitivity to the full range of cinematic possibilities, Richter suggests, could transform the disappointed filmgoer of the present into an informed advocate for the poetic films of the future.[311]

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[311] See Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen* (Berlin: Hermann Reckendorf, 1929). Produced in collaboration with Werner Graeff, *Filmgegner von heute* (originally published in large 26 x 19 cm format) amounts to an unofficial compendium to the

While Richter's examples in *Filmgegner von heute* are drawn from a wide variety of works—including Soviet narrative and documentary films, educational *Kulturfilme*, and cinematic experiments tied to Dada and Surrealism—he repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental importance of rhythm and motion in cinema. Richter writes: "Rhythmus im Film bedeutet nicht weniger, als die künstlerisch klar geregelte Folge der Bewegungen. — Der Rhythmus bestimmt jede filmische Ausdrucksform, jedes künstlerische Mittel innerhalb des Films."[312] By subordinating all other cinematic means to the primacy of rhythm, Richter bases his understanding of film not in its photographic or reproductive nature, but rather in its capabilities for producing articulated movements in time and space. That cinema could produce a controlled illusion of contrasting motion was far more important than its objective reference to the external world. For Richter, in other words, the true art of cinema was based not in photography but rather in *animation*: cinema's fundamental ability to produce the experience of movement out of still images, whether those images originated in photographic representations of nature, hand-drawn

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film program organized by Richter for the *Film und Foto* show. In addition to avant-garde selections curated by Richter (including films by Man Ray, Viking Eggeling, Germaine Dulac, René Clair, Fernand Léger, and Richter himself), El Lissitzky's program of Russian cinema famously introduced a wider German audience to the latest developments in Soviet documentary and montage. For details, see the reprinted catalog from the exhibition, *Film und Foto: Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbundes* [1929], ed. Karl Steinorth (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979).

[312] Richter, *Filmgegner von heute*, p. 42. Elsewhere, Richter refers to rhythm as, "die Grundform, das Skelett eines Films" (p. 34). Beyond cinema, rhythm also figured prominently as a broader principle of formal construction in modernist painting and poetics. The influence of such aesthetic discussions during Richter's formative years as an Expressionist painter no doubt played a decisive role in his understanding of cinema. On the visual rhythms of abstract painting, see Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei* [1912] (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 2004); and Oswald Herzog, "Der abstrakte Expressionismus," *Der Sturm* 10.2 (1919/20): p. 29. Here, Herzog declares the "Form" of abstract painting as "Bewegung-Rhythmus." For a related statement in Expressionist poetics, see Herwarth Walden, "Das Begriffliche in der Dichtung," *Der Sturm* 9.5 (August 1918): pp. 66–67: "Das Material der Dichtung ist das Wort. Die Form der Dichtung ist der Rhythmus" (p. 66).

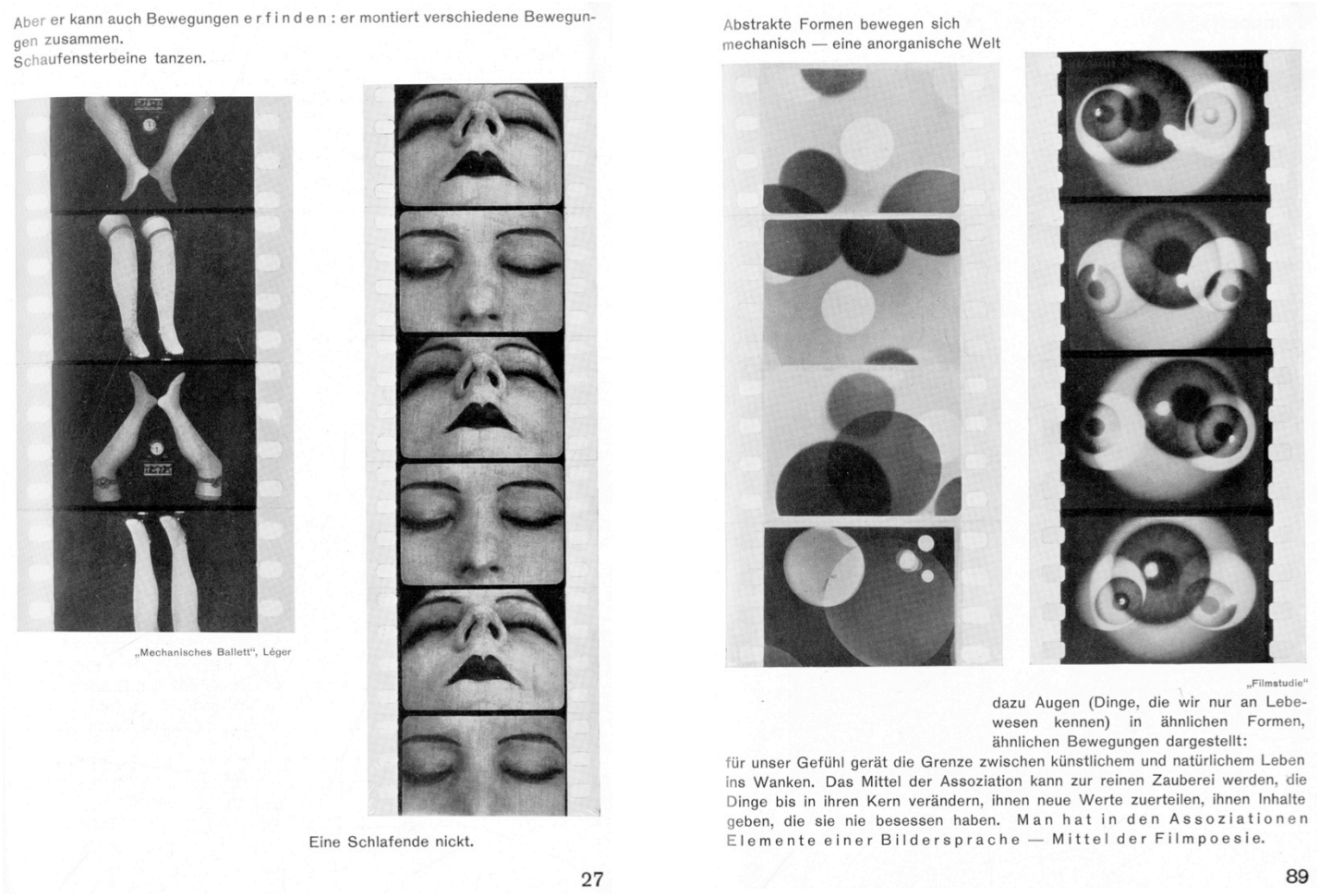

Figure 4.1. "*Aber [der Regisseur] kann auch Bewegungen* erfinden ... " —
Hans Richter. *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen*, 1929. Page reproductions.

pictures, or textual, symbolic, and abstract forms.

Throughout the book, Richter provides ample evidence for the central importance of motion in 1920s cinema, bolstering Gilles Deleuze's later claim of a "movement-image" that dominated film before World War II.[313] With respect to the experimental avant-garde in particular, Richter discusses the production of movement not only as inherent to the cinematic medium (cinema as a type of animation), but also as a prevalent strategy for the purposeful animation of non-living things. "[Der Rhythmus] kann einen sich drehenden Kragen zu einem lebendigen Wesen machen," Richter writes, drawing an example from Man Ray's 1926 film *Emak Bakia*.[314] Discrete objects could also be brought to life through montage or be magically transformed through visual associations of animated forms, as illustrated by Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924) and Richter's own *Filmstudie* (1928), respectively (figure 4.1). By producing a "feeling" (*Gefühl*) of movement, Richter asserts, cinema could effectively destabilize the boundary "between artificial and natural life" (*zwischen künstlichem und natürlichem Leben*), granting otherwise lifeless things the same animated presence as truly living beings.[315] In his discussion of avant-garde films, Richter thus juxtaposes two different meanings of animation: the production of movement and the imparting of life. Understood as the underlying force of cinema, rhythmic motion could produce a cinematic life that was common to things and humans, abstract forms and photographed objects (figure 4.2).

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[313] See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[314] Richter, *Filmgegner von heute*, p. 94.

[315] Ibid., p. 89.

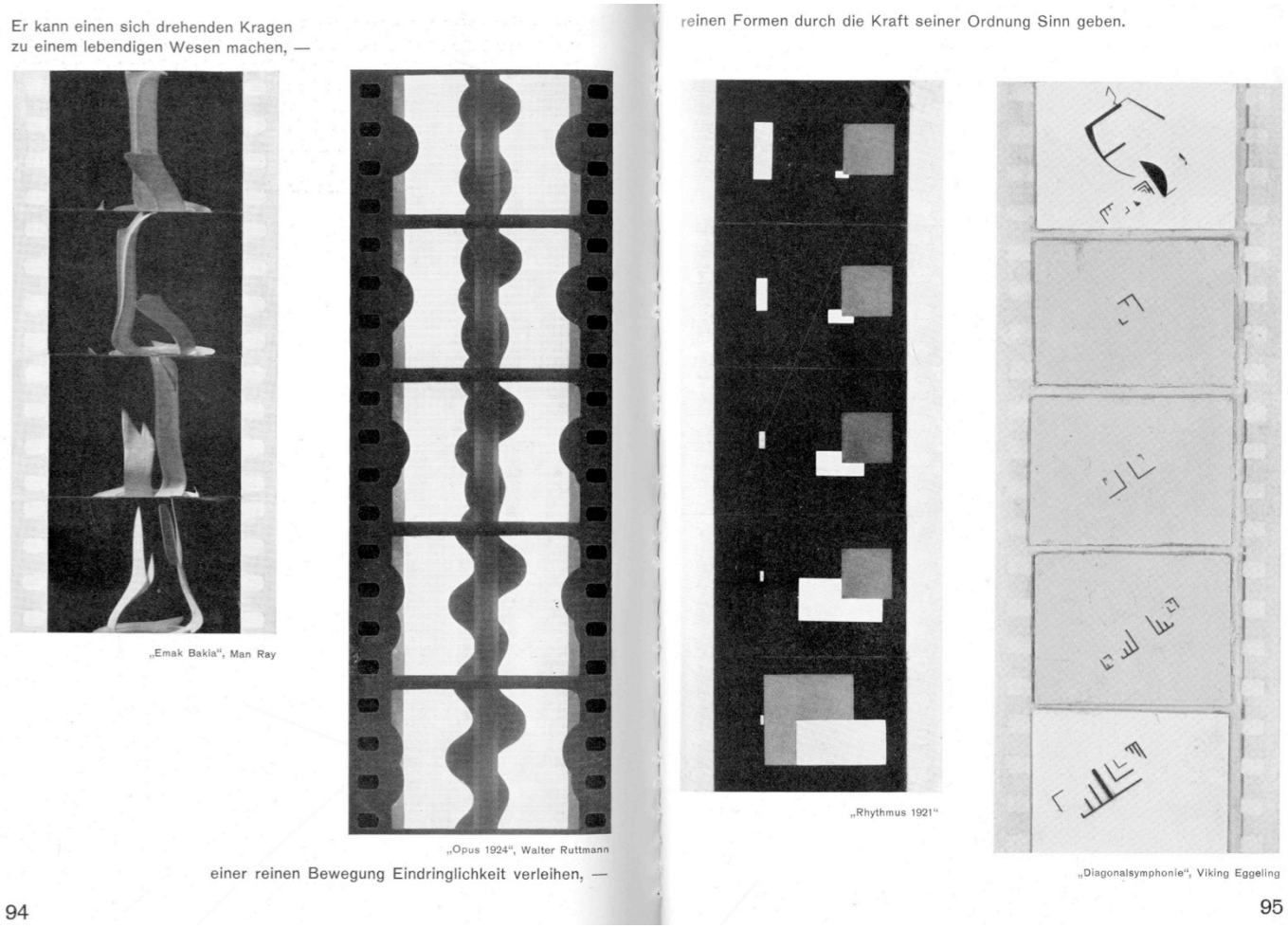

Figure 4.2. "*[Der Rhythmus] kann einen sich drehenden Kragen zu einem lebendigen Wesen machen ...*" — Hans Richter. *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen*, 1929. Page reproductions.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the word "animation" in reference to film was common to English language usage by around 1910, as a description not only for a range of cinematic techniques used to bring objects to life, but also for the cinematic medium itself (as a case of "animated photography").[316] By around 1920, the term took on a more specific meaning, in both English and French, to designate the growing popular genre of cartoon films or "animated drawings" (*dessins animés*).[317] In German, by contrast, the term "*Trickfilm*" continued to serve as a broad designation for not only animated cartoons, but also photographically based films dominated by trick-techniques as well as the cinematic experiments of the avant-garde.[318] While the word "*Animation*" in reference to film was still foreign to German usage of the 1920s, I employ the term here both in its earlier English sense (to articulate an understanding of cinema as a means of simulating life and a medium based in movement-production) as well as in the broader German sense of the trick-film genre. In this way, the concept of cinematic animation is not limited to the frame-by-frame technique (familiar from animated drawings or stop-motion films), but also includes the full range of cinematic means for producing articulated motion (which Richter enumerates in *Filmgegner von heute*): the manipulation of camera speed, position, and movement; the use of close-up shots, distorting optics, and reverse motion; multiple fields and exposures; live-action sequences; and accelerated

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[316] See, for example, the discussion of cinematic illusion and trick techniques in Frederick A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (London: William Heinemann, 1912).

[317] On the interrelated histories of early French and American cartoon animation, see Donald Crafton's biographical study, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

[318] For a detailed presentation of the techniques and genre of the trick-film, see Guido Seeber, *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten: Eine praktische und theoretische Darstellung der photographischen Filmtricks* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1927).

rhythmic editing and montage. Articulated through these various means, Richter's emphatic notion of rhythm can be understood as the underlying and controlled structure of cinematic animation and its effects.[319]

In the case of avant-garde filmmaking of the 1920s, the cinematic production of movement (*Bewegung*) and the animateness (*Belebung*) of objects perceived on-screen also coincides with an emphasis on the physiological impact of cinema: its ability to tap into and affect the vital rhythms of the human body. Here, cinematic motion evokes an additional meaning of animation preserved in its etymological connection to breath and breathing (lat. *anima*). Discussing the aim of his and Eggeling's abstract films in a 1924 article, Richter writes:

> man ist – ausgeliefert – zum „Fühlen" gezwungen – zum Mitgehen im Rhythmus – Atmen – Herzschlag; – . . . der durch das Auf und Ab des Vorgangs, *das* deutlich machen kann, was Fühlen und Empfinden eigentlich ist . . . ein Prozeß – *Bewegung*.[320]

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[319] A discussion of the frame-by-frame technique used in both animated drawings and the abstract films of the avant-garde is notably limited in Richter's *Filmgegner von heute*. See pp. 9–10. The brief presentation of the technique, alongside images from scientific and documentary films, provides further evidence that Richter saw little ontological distinction between moving images based in drawings, abstract forms, and text, on the one hand, and photographic representations of the external world, on the other. In current theory, Lev Manovich has attempted to undo the marginalization of animation as a fringe element of cinema by considering photographically based, live-action cinema as merely, "one particular case of animation." While Manovich's polemic originates in response to new digital animation technologies of the 1990s, the emphasis on animation and movement in the 1920s avant-garde offers qualified, historical support for challenging the dominance of film theories based on photographic referentiality. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 298–308, quoted here, p. 302.

[320] Richter, "Die schlecht trainierte Seele," *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* 3 (June 1924): pp. 44–47, here, p. 45 (emphasis in original). Page references to *G.* are from the reprint, ed. Marion von Hofacker (Munich: Kern, 1986). This text and other short articles by Richter from the 1920s can also be found reprinted in Jeanpaul Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus* [*Kinemathek* 95] (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 2003), here p. 28.

In Richter's emphasis on rhythm, it is crucial that cinematic motion not simply be *seen* but also *felt* in the body of the viewer, as a compulsory influence on vital, internal processes like "breathing" (*Atmen*). Richter thus imagines an embodied spectator, who participates in and is transformed by the cinematic effects of articulated movement. By asserting this connection between cinematic motion and the physiological rhythms of the body, Richter stakes his claim within the broader avant-garde project of reorganizing and training human perception.[321] This sense of a direct "animation" of an embodied viewer's feelings and sensations, however, enters into a complex relationship with the conscious experience of cinematic movement and a simulated life of things—especially with Richter's mid-1920s turn from pure abstraction to representational, photographic imagery. In analyzing Richter and the avant-garde's strategic engagement with film during the 1920s, this chapter will explore the particular interrelations and conflicts that arise between these various aspects of cinematic animation.

In recent studies, the relationship between animation and the interwar avant-garde has been largely situated in two different ways. On the one hand, scholars of cultural history and film have focused on the purely abstract animations of Richter, Walter Ruttmann, and Viking Eggeling from the early 1920s. Here, the supposedly hermetic project of developing a "universal language" or "visual music" through abstract film has been productively explicated in terms of its historical connections to broader, modernist

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[321] Raoul Hausmann's and Viking Eggeling's understandings of avant-garde production, for example, articulate related aims of increasing the viewer's "somatic functionality" (*somatische Funktionalität*). See their manifesto, "Zweite präsentistische Deklaration: Gerichtet an die internationalen Konstruktivisten," *MA* 8.5/6 (1923). For an account of the relationship between film and the avant-garde's project of sensory training, see Tobias Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses," *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): pp. 39–55.

discourses on abstraction and space, body culture and dance, the psychology of advertising, and the experience of technological modernity.[322] On the other hand, scholars informed by Critical Theory (and interested in the political ramifications of film) have drawn conceptual links between the avant-garde and commercial animation, largely mediated by Walter Benjamin's reflections on technology and mass culture in relation to early Disney cartoons.[323] While this range of scholarship informs the present discussion, my approach is to investigate the intended role of cinematic animation within the specific theory and practice of the 1920s avant-garde. Richter proves exemplary in this regard due to his broad exploration of animation techniques and varied experimentation with elements of abstraction, photographic representation, and narrative in film. As a central organizer, editor, polemicist, and practitioner within many crucial movements and moments of the historical avant-garde, Richter represents a full range of avant-garde

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[322] For a comprehensive overview of such cultural-historical connections in relation to Richter and Eggeling's abstract films, see the essays collected in *Hans Richters* Rhythmus 21*: Schlüsselfilm der Moderne*, ed. Forschungsnetzwerk BTWH (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012). For essays and primary texts on Ruttmann's early animation work, see Jeanpaul Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989).

[323] On the importance of early Disney animation for Benjamin's reflections on politics, history, and technology, see Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.1 (Winter 1993): pp. 27–61; as well as her updated piece, "Micky-Maus," in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012), pp. 161–82. Esther Leslie has also charted the many productive encounters between avant-garde filmmakers and commercial cartoons, but with little sensitivity to the particular milieus, practices, and discourses of avant-garde cinema. See Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory, and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002). More recently, Andrés Mario Zervigón has presented a concrete, historical reworking of Benjamin's theories of Dada and Disney through an exciting study of George Grosz and John Heartfield's plans to produce somatic shocks through the use of animated drawings and puppets in WWI-era propaganda films. See Zervigón, "'A Political Struwwelpeter?': John Heartfield's Early Film Animation and the Wartime Crisis of Photographic Representation, 1917–1918," in *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 95–135.

activities and positions, and, within each context, places the rhythms, movements, and animations of cinema at the forefront of aesthetic experimentation.

As a key document on the relationship between cinema and the historical avant-garde, Benjamin's mid-1930s text, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, provides a telling formulation to encapsulate my reading of avant-garde animation. In a less frequently discussed note in the famous essay, Benjamin condensed a by then common, theoretical claim about cinema: in contrast to theater, film was capable of inverting the traditional relationship between actor and prop, "showing" (*zeigen*) how material things could subversively "play" with the lives of humans (*wie die Materie dem Menschen mitspielt*).[324] Throughout the chapter, Richter's 1928 film *Vormittagsspuk*, in particular, will be taken up as a complex engagement with this very capability. Employing the full range of techniques listed above, *Vormittagsspuk* presents the dynamic animation of everyday objects and their playful rebellion against human control. In Richter's avant-garde treatment, however, this simple theme (familiar from earlier slapstick- and trick-films) is newly situated within the context of a formally experimental and self-reflective cinematic work. The interplay between human actors and animated things exists not only on the level of inscription within the image content of the film; in Richter's structuring of cinematic movement, humans and things also function as abstract, formal elements directed at the viewer's embodied reception of rhythmic motion.

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[324] Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [3rd (now 5th) version, 1936–39], *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), p. 229. The same formulation appears as well in the earlier 2nd (now 3rd) version of the *Kunstwerk* essay (1936). See, in the same volume, p. 118.

The goal of the present chapter is to discuss how, in avant-garde works like Richter's *Vormittagsspuk*, this ability to *show* (*zeigen*) a material "life" of things on film coincides with a *demonstration* of the techniques, effects, and material basis of cinematic animation. A guiding assumption of the argument is that the avant-garde's engagement with animation and rhythm must be emphatically distinguished from the productions of both cartoons and commercial live-action films. In contrast to the seamless animations of Disney cartoons as well as the drive toward an "equipment-free aspect of reality" (*der apparatfreie Aspekt der Realität*), which Benjamin identifies in commercial studio films, avant-garde cinema can be understood to develop complex strategies for demonstrating the material basis and means of cinematic production.[325] Nowhere is this more evident than in the cinematic avant-garde's animation of material objects, which exhibit a visibly ambiguous status as both magically "living" things on the level of image-content and abstract, formal constructions related to the productive capabilities of cinema. Analyzing a range of films and texts by prominent artists and thinkers of the 1920s, I will show how animated objects serve as a important focal point in avant-garde cinema for encouraging a self-conscious experience of cinematic techniques and effects, as well as opening up a space for the viewer's active participation and imaginative play vis-à-vis the moving image. This last claim will be substantiated through a close reading of *Vormittagsspuk* toward the end of the chapter. Throughout the discussion, Richter's specific trajectory as a filmmaker, theorist, and long-standing promoter of experimental film will provide a

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[325] Cf. Benjamin's famous description of the artifice of "immediate reality" sought in studio film production in ibid., pp. 234–35, quoted here, p. 235. In his 1941 notes on Walt Disney, Sergei Eisenstein, for example, emphasizes the obscure and undetectable technological basis of animated cartoons. See *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986), in particular, p. 55.

unifying thread for assessing the broader significance and substantial role of animation within avant-garde cinema of the 1920s.

Der absolute Film

While Richter's presentation in *Filmgegner von heute* closely reflects his own personal interests as a filmmaker, his overall assessment of cinema in terms of rhythmic motion and animation also reinforces longstanding priorities within the general theory and practice of the interwar avant-garde. Published in 1929, Richter's book coincides with a critical juncture in the history of avant-garde cinema, characterized by the dissolution of previous strands of experimental filmmaking (whether Dadaist, Constructivist, or Surrealist), the introduction of sound film, a situation of increasing political hostilities, and attempts at broad international coordination among innovative directors, camera-operators, and film-theorists.[326] At a time when experimental filmmakers were moving more and more into commercial territories of advertising, industry films, and narrative

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[326] This confluence of historical challenges was addressed most directly with the 1929 *Congres international du cinématographe indépendant*. Occurring just months after the *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart, the congress gathered key theorists and avant-garde filmmakers in La Sarraz, Switzerland with the aim of consolidating larger, international audiences for artistic films. Facing the emerging dominance of commercial sound-film and mounting political tensions, the meeting sought to foster a financially independent and politically engaged cinema, without bowing to the conventions of the narrative feature-film. Among the participants were Richter, Ruttmann, Béla Balázs, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Léon Moussinac, as well as Sergei Eisenstein, who coordinated with Richter in directing the impromptu, allegorical film, *La guerre entre le film indépendant et le film industriel* (*Tempête sur La Sarraz*) during the event. In Malte Hagener's detailed study, the meeting in La Sarraz marks both the peak and breaking point of a supposedly autonomous, avant-garde cinema, revealing its financial dependence on and partial subservience to either wealthy patrons or commercial studios and advertisement companies. See Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2007). For a reconstruction of the meeting in La Sarraz, see Helma Schleif (ed.), *Stationen der Moderne im Film II: Texte, Manifeste, Pamphlete* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989), pp. 200–19.

cinema (Richter included), *Filmgegner von heute* marks an attempt at assessing the distinct characteristics and oppositional nature of avant-garde cinema in order to consolidate its enduring potentials. Richter's continued emphasis on rhythmic movement and simulated life highlights the central importance of animation for the cinematic practice of the historical avant-garde.

Richter's first explorations in cinematic animation came with his early series of abstract *Rhythmus* films between 1921 and 1925. Along with the Swedish avant-gardist Viking Eggeling, Richter turned explicitly to cinema in order to realize a pure "art of movement" (*Bewegungskunst*) that could develop beyond the limitations of static painting.[327] While Eggeling worked toward the animated orchestration of complex, linear forms found in his *Symphonie Diagonale* (1923–24), Richter radically limited all graphic elements in his films in order to explore the articulation of movement for its own sake. In his first cinematic work *Film ist Rhythmus* (1923), alternatively titled *Rhythmus 21*, Richter used the simple darkened or illuminated rectangle of the cinema screen, not as a geometrically significant form in itself, but rather as a means of expressing relationships of movement through varying positions, speeds, sizes, shades, and directions.[328]

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[327] Their collaborative work toward abstract animation began around 1920 and was assisted by the funding and technical support of the Universum Film AG (UFA) studio. For a theoretical statement on their work, see the programmatic text attributed to Richter (but largely conceived by Eggeling), "Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst," *De Stijl* 4.7 (July 1921): pp. 109–12.

[328] Richter and Eggeling's abstract film work was publicized as early as 1921 through their writings and drawings as well as through third-party accounts based on studio visits. Contrary to Richter's retrospective accounts and preferred *Rhythmus 21* title, however, his first abstract film could not have been publicly screened before 1923. For a detailed account that carefully dates the making and exhibition of the film, see Holger Wilmesmeier, "Entstehungsgeschichte: Le Film 100 Titres," in *Hans Richters* Rhythmus 21, pp. 33–44. See also, Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 87–93.

Despite their differing emphases, both Richter's and Eggeling's early cinematic experiments resonated with the broader, constructivist aesthetics of the interwar avant-garde, which sought to isolate the productive potentials of specific media, while rejecting the conventions of mimetic realism and narrative. Making explicit reference to the work of Richter and Eggeling, László Moholy-Nagy's important 1922 essay "Produktion-Reproduktion," for example, declares the primary task of film as, "die Gestaltung der *Bewegung an sich*." Alongside related discussions of other technological media, Moholy-Nagy defines the functional essence of cinema ("Bewegungsbeziehungen der Lichtprojektionen") in order to direct its *productive* (rather than merely *re*productive) capabilities toward the development of new relations and experiences.[329] A year earlier, the art critic (and early proponent of Richter and Eggeling's work) Adolf Behne claimed similarly:

> Filmkunst ist Bewegungskunst. Aber wiederum zu beachten: Soweit der Film fremde (natürliche oder gestellte) Bewegungen aufzeichnet und wiedergibt, ist er reproduktiv, nicht Kunstwerk. Die Bewegungen selbst müssen das Kunstwerk ausmachen. Dann, nur dann kommen die Bewegungsvorgänge und der Film zur Deckung. Der Film wird Materialisierung des Bewegungskunstwerks und damit ein besonderes, neues, eigenartiges künstlerisches Mittel.[330]

For both Moholy-Nagy and Behne, the legitimacy of film as an art form depended on the isolation and exploration of the medium's unique capabilities. Conceived as an "art of movement" in the purest sense, cinema thus precluded any basis in the photographic reproduction of natural movements or dramatic action. Tellingly, Behne refers to the marginalized genre of cartoon animation (*gezeichnete Trickfilme*) as a model for a

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[329] For the above quotes, see László Moholy-Nagy, "Produktion-Reproduktion," *De Stijl* 5.7 (July 1922): pp. 235–36 (emphasis in original).

[330] Adolf Behne, "Der Film als Kunstwerk," *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 27 (1921): pp. 1116–18, here, p. 1117.

cinematic art based solely on the medium's productive capabilities. For Behne, the advancement made by Richter and Eggeling's films was to take the principle of the animated trick-film but reduce its pictorial elements to pure abstraction. In this way, the artists could explore the laws of cinematic movement as such and produce well-ordered, filmic constructions that presented, "eine logische Abwickelung [*sic*] abstrakter Formen von geometrischer Präzision."[331]

Richter's early experiments in cinematic abstraction first reached a wider audience with the famous 1925 *Absoluter Film* matinee in Berlin, where his work appeared alongside the films of Eggeling, Ruttmann, Léger, and René Clair.[332] While the films shared similar origins in the milieu of avant-garde provocation (Richter's early *Rhythmus* work was screened at the notorious 1923 Dada *Soirée du coeur à barbe* in Paris, for example), their mainstream presentation under the collective rubric of "*absoluter Film*" underscored divergent tendencies in experimental cinema. Like the German designation of absolute film, the French *cinéma pur* defined itself largely in opposition to the literary and theatrical aspirations of the feature-film and focused instead on the productive capabilities of cinema itself. There were key differences, however,

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[331] Ibid., p. 1118. On the animated trick-film, Behne writes: "Nur die gezeichneten Trickfilme schieden die Natürlichkeit aus. Das, was aufgenommen werden sollte, hatte von vornherein zur Bezug auf den Film, existierte außer ihm nicht. [...] Nun liegen aber, die Vorstadien der gezeichneten Filme hinter sich lassend, zwei Versuche [i.e. Richter's and Eggeling's] vor den Film als ein selbständiges neues Kunstwerk zu verwirklichen." (pp. 1116–17).

[332] Organized by the Novembergruppe, the famous avant-garde cinema program "Der absolute Film" screened over two days (May 3 and 10, 1925) at the Ufa-Theater on Kurfürstendamm. In addition to films by those listed above, the program also included the colored light-projections *Dreiteilige Farbensonatine* by Bauhaus artist Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack. For a detailed account of the event, see Holger Wilmesmeier, *Deutsche Avantgarde und Film: Die Filmmatinee "Der absolute Film"* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1994).

between the abstract films of Richter, Ruttmann, and Eggeling, on the one hand, and the Dadaist provocations of Léger's *Ballet mécanique* and René Clair's *Entr'acte* (both 1924), on the other.[333] While all films were based in the media-specific possibilities of cinematic motion, the chaotic impression made by Léger's and Clair's photographic images was far removed from the appearance of logically constructed movement found in abstract animation.[334]

Within the broad, production aesthetics of avant-garde film, an inherent conflict seemed to arise as soon as photographic imagery and live-action sequences were used as constructive materials. Appearing in the pages of Richter's journal *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* (1923–26), René Clair himself explained this tension in relation to his film *Entr'acte*:

> Ehe ich mich über den Klebetisch beugte, dachte ich, daß es sehr leicht wäre, dem Film einen regelmäßigen Rhythmus zu geben. Ich unterschied drei Faktoren, mit deren Hilfe sich eine Kadenz erzielen lassen könnte, nicht unähnlich derjenigen der lateinischen Verse.
>
> 1. Dauer eines Bildes.
> 2. Abwechslung der Szenen oder Motive der Handlung (innere Bewegung).
> 3. Bewegung der von dem Objektiv photographierten Gegenstände (äußere Bewegung, Spiel des Darstellers, Bewegung der Dekoration).
>
> Man kann die Verhältnisse dieser drei Faktoren nicht leicht definieren, denn der rhythmische Wert dieser Bildchen hängt ja auch von den äußeren Bewegung des Films oder dessen sentimentalen Eigenschaften ab, und die sind unwägbar;

[333] *Entr'acte* presents perhaps the clearest, historical case of a Dadaist film. Produced by Clair in collaboration with Francis Picabia, the film was first screened as prelude and intermission to Picabia's 1924 ballet *Relâche* and served a crucial role in the overall provocation of the Dada performance. On the relationship between the ballet and film, see George Baker, "Entr'acte," *October* 105 (Summer 2003): pp. 159–65. The film known as *Ballet mécanique* premiered in 1924 as well, in Vienna, and appeared under the title *Images mobiles* at the 1925 *Absoluter Film* matinee in Berlin.

[334] For a contemporaneous account that underscores this distinction, see Rudolf Kurtz's discussion of "absolute Kunst" in, *Expressionismus und Film* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926), pp. 86–108. Kurtz's discussion of individual films is conspicuously limited to the very ones screened at *Der absolute Film* matinee. Kurtz thanks Richter himself for assistance in preparing the book, offering evidence that Richter may have shaped Kurtz's understanding of the films. (p. 5)

> die metrischen Gesetze halten da nicht stand. Der Zuschauer eines Autorennens im Film wird zur handelnden Person, ergreift das Steuerrad, beobachtet den Geschwindigkeitsmesser, und in seine Augen stürzen sich die Bäume der Landstraße.
>
> Ich persönlich könnte mich leicht dazu entschließen, in der Welt der Bilder auf Regel und Logik zu verzichten; die wunderbare Barbarei einer solchen Möglichkeit entzückt mich, endlich Urwelt, Natur, unberührtes Land. Sätze kann man nicht unlogisch machen, ohne sie umzubringen, aber warum sollen sich Bilder, die an sich keinen absoluten Wert haben, mit Logik beschweren?[335]

Titling his essay "Rhythmus," Clair asserts here the incommensurability of a rational, rhythmic structuring of film with the chaotic mass of moving images recorded from life. Using the racing automobiles found in *Entr'acte* as his primary example, Clair affirms the viewer's active participation ("*Der Zuschauer* [...] *wird zur handelnden Person*") in the dynamic succession of shocking and fragmented images, while suppressing any overall logic to the cinematic construction of movement.

This conflict between a rational, constructivist, and abstract strand of filmmaking, on the one hand, and a subversively illogical and chaotic one, on the other, has long been a sticking point in characterizing and delimiting the cinematic works of the interwar avant-garde. How does one define a collection of films that includes both the anarchy of Dada and the abstract purity of Constructivism? Rather than attempting to reconcile, periodize, or otherwise divide up these conflicting developments, I would like to trace their contradictory aspects back to a common root: the overriding emphasis on movement

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[335] René Clair, "Rhythmus," *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* 5/6 (April 1926): p. 116. The original French version of the essay was published a year earlier as, "Rythme," *Cahiers du mois* 16/17 (1925): pp. 13–16. Richter's journal, although better known under its original subtitle *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, was renamed starting with the third issue. On Richter's understanding of "*Gestaltung*" and its relationship to international constructivism, see Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings, "Introduction: The G-Group and the European Avant-Garde," in their recent, edited translation of the journal, *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923–1926*, trans. Steven Lindberg et al. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), pp. 3–20.

within the cinematic avant-garde. In this way, the conflict can be understood not as one between different principles or types of cinema, but rather as an internal friction between the form and content of the animated image. So long as the image content was reduced to abstract elements, the formal production of movement could maintain an appearance of logical order. With the introduction of photographic reproductions of external objects and movements, however, an underlying formal construction of motion could very well appear at odds with the suggestive content of the image. In avant-garde cinema in particular, a dominant fascination with the dynamic animation of everyday objects, machines, human figures, and shapes seemed to undermine any formal order or logic to the cinematic composition. This increased tension between the form and content of the animated image, I would like to propose, can be understood as a characteristic feature of avant-garde cinema in general. Richter's own diverse body of films will serve as case and point.[336]

Likely inspired by the French contributions to the 1925 *Absoluter Film* matinee, Richter thereafter dropped his strict adherence to cinematic abstraction and began to

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[336] Not surprisingly, Richter's varied cinematic work has featured prominently in past debates on the classification of avant-garde films. For a definition of Dadaist cinema that loosely includes both Richter's early *Rhythmus* films and later works like *Filmstudie* and *Vormittagsspuk*, see Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Introduction" and Thomas Elsaesser, "Dada/Cinema?," in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Kuenzli (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 1–12 and 13–27, respectively. By contrast, Justin Hoffmann makes the case for situating Richter's films as part of international Constructivism. See his article, "Hans Richter: Constructivist Filmmaker," in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 72–91. More recently, Malcolm Turvey has attempted to reconcile the *Rhythmus* films with the aims of Dada by following Richter's own retrospective (and rather suspect) account of the interwar avant-garde in his articles and interviews of the 1950s and 60s. See Turvey, "Dada Between Heaven and Hell: Abstraction and Universal Language in the *Rhythm* Films of Hans Richter," *October* 105 (Summer 2003): pp. 13–36.

experiment with traditional photography and figurative imagery in his films.[337] Richter's work on *Filmstudie* after 1925 marked a first move in this direction by integrating photographic images of moving faces, eyeballs, and a flock of birds into the overall composition of cinematic motion.[338] While Richter had expanded the image content of his films, he still emphasized the primacy of an underlying rhythmic structure in film. In a short 1926 article published in the influential, American literary journal *Little Review*, Richter reaffirmed his allegiance to cinematic rhythm as, "the unity binding all parts into a whole."[339] And Richter's *Filmstudie* indeed marks a certain continuity with his early *Rhythmus* films by integrating similar, geometric abstractions as well as new animated compositions of circles and lines. (*Filmstudie* was in fact first privately screened under the title *Rhythmus*.[340]) But with its introduction of multiplying photographic images of faces, eyes, and birds, the experience of *Filmstudie* becomes less that of a logical and well-ordered construction of movement and more one of floating chaos and confusion.

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[337] For an account stressing the influence of Clair and Léger on Richter's turn away from pure abstraction, see Joel Westerdale, "3 May 1925: French and German Avant-Garde Converge at *Der absolute Film*," in *A New History of German Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), pp. 160–65. As Westerdale points out, Richter himself, in later writings, would closely associate his subsequent film work with *Entr'acte* and *Ballet mécanique*. See, for example, Richter's 1930s book manuscript, *Kampf um den Film: Für einen gesellschaftlich verantwortlichen Film* [1939], ed. Jürgen Römhild (Munich: Hanser, 1976), pp. 42–44. On this influence, see also R. Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008), pp. 163–67.

[338] Although typically dated 1925–26, when Richter began work on the film, *Filmstudie* was not shown until 1928, first at a private screening hosted by the *Gesellschaft neuer Film* in Berlin and shortly thereafter at the Ufa-Theater on Kurfürstendamm. See Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, p. 93.

[339] Richter, "Rhythm," *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): p. 21.

[340] See Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, p. 93

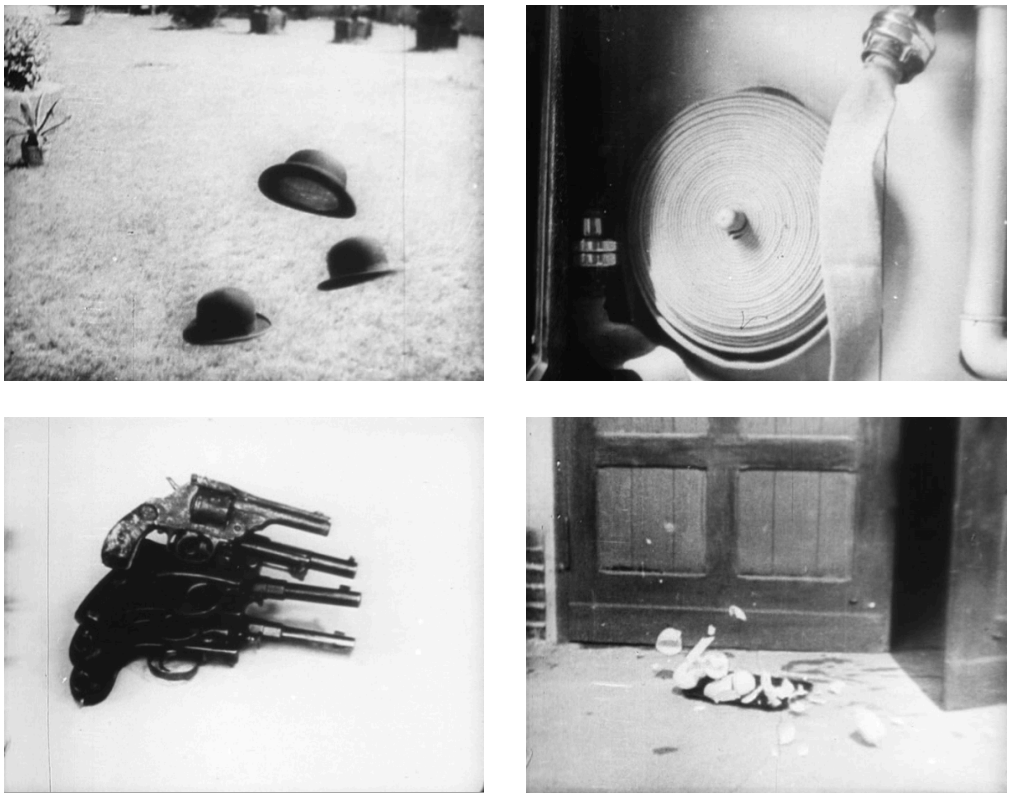

Figure 4.3. Hans Richter. *Vormittagsspuk*, 1928. Film stills.

As Siegfried Kracauer described it at the time: "*Film-Studie* [...] läßt durch ein Wolkenchaos Kugeln steigen, die sich in Augen verwandeln; setzt Pflastersteine in ein Gittergeflecht um, das zu taumeln beginnt."[341]

This unruly animation of objects was developed further in Richter's film *Vormittagsspuk*, which was produced in 1927 and first screened in 1928. In this somewhat longer, quasi-narrative film, Richter employs various means of animating objects (including bowler hats, water hoses, pistols, and teacups) to stage an all-out rebellion of things against their usually subservient and functional roles (figure 4.3). The sequences of moving objects appear along with live-action shots of humans attempting to

[341] Siegfried Kracauer, "Abstrakter Film" [1928], in *Kino: Essays, Studien, Glossen zum Film*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 45–46.

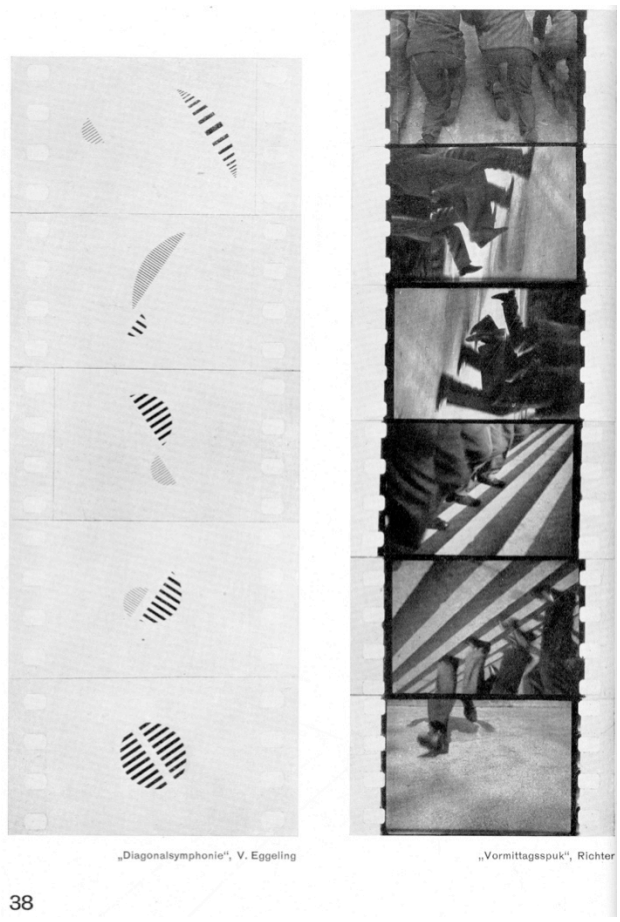

Figure 4.4. Hans Richter. *Filmgegner von heute*, 1929. Page reproduction.

control the rebellious things, creating an overall chaotic composition not unlike the flurry of objects and bodies found in Léger's *Ballet mécanique* or the fragmented chase scene at the end of Clair's *Entr'acte*. At the same time, however, Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* also suggests abstract formal elements, which inform its pictorial compositions and dynamic montage-sequences. Richter draws attention to this aspect of *Vormittagsspuk* in *Filmgegner von heute* by juxtaposing stills of the film with Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale* (figure 4.4). The film is additionally structured by the prominent, rhythmic punctuations of a ticking clock, as will be discussed later on in the chapter. But while Richter insists on an overall rhythmic structure to his film, *Vormittagsspuk* indeed gives

the exact opposite impression of formal cohesion. The film's content—of a chaotic and anarchic life of things—appears at odds with any overall compositional logic.

In an anecdote often repeated in postwar publications on his paintings and films, Richter recounts Sergei Eisenstein's troubled response to *Vormittagsspuk*: "Eisenstein asked me repeatedly what I wanted to say when I made [*Vormittagsspuk*]. He could hardly believe that the content, the story—rebellion of objects against daily routine—developed, so to say, as the by-product of a rhythmical conception and by improvisation."[342] According to Richter's retrospective account, the content of the film emerged solely out of his continued experimentation with rhythmical form. Rather than take Richter simply at his word, however, I would like to focus instead on the tension underlined by this anecdotal exchange: that is, the irritating divergence between formal construction and image content in the viewer's experience of the film. Here, Eisenstein's own *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) provides a convenient point of contrast. In the film's famous montage sequence of the awakening lion statue, Eisenstein achieves a sophisticated coordination between the form and content of cinematic animation. The constructed animation of a stone lion through successive stills of different statues not only marks a crucial turning point in the narrative content of the film (i.e. the battleship's retaliation for the violent massacre on the Odessa steps); the statue's artificially produced movement also enacts a corresponding awakening of resistance and response in the mind of the viewer (figure 4.5). In Eisenstein's montage construction, the shot lengths are carefully timed so that the formal impression of natural movement develops

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[342] Quoted here from *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, ed. Cleve Gray (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 145.

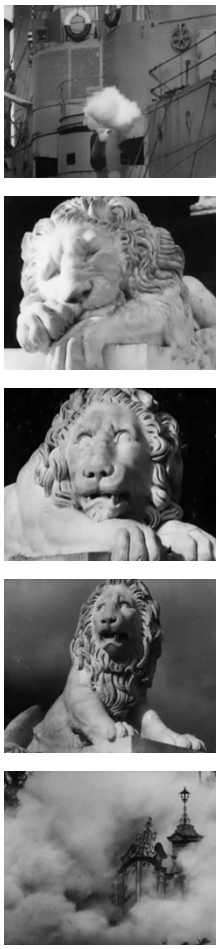

Figure 4.5. Sergei Eisenstein. *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925. Film stills.

simultaneously with the meaning of the image series. The animated thing itself, that is to say, synchronizes an emerging symbolic meaning in relation to the film's content with a visceral experience of a formally constructed, rhythmic movement.[343]

For a filmmaker like Eisenstein, the animated objects in Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* must have seemed arbitrary and hopelessly severed from any meaningful construction of motion. What the Eisenstein of Richter's anecdote seems to miss, however, is the

[343] See Eisenstein's discussion of this montage sequence in his, "The Dramaturgy of Film Form (A Dialectical Approach to Film Form)" [1929], in *Selected Works, Volume 1: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1988), pp. 161–80, here, pp. 172–74.

importance of movement for its own sake. In contrast to Eisenstein's formalist approach, the experimental cinema of the European avant-garde reveled in the basic productive capabilities of film to generate new experiences of movement beyond any ostensible meaning—whether these experiences corresponded to the well-ordered motion of abstract animation or the visual shocks and anarchy of Dada. In combining these two divergent tendencies of earlier avant-garde cinema, Richter's later film *Vormittagsspuk* allows the viewer to experience a widened rift and interference between the deliberate and logical construction of abstract movement in cinema, on the one hand, and the rather irrational sensation of a dynamic and unruly life of photographed objects, on the other. Rather than consider this a shortcoming of Richter's film, I would like to highlight it as indicative of the unique, aesthetic potential of the avant-garde's engagement with cinematic animation.

Things and Cinema

The role of animated objects specific to avant-garde cinema gains additional clarity in relation to the larger context of interwar film theory. Much like in the reception of early cinema, critics and theorists of the 1920s repeatedly emphasized cinema's capabilities to foreground and animate nonliving things, making them no less significant than human actors on screen. As discussed in Chapter 2, the concentrated production of stop-motion trick-films between 1905 and 1912 addressed the animation of things in a quite literal manner—through the frame-by-frame animation of objects in what appeared to be live-action settings. Despite the crude and jittery appearance of such films, this unique potential of cinema drew the attention of numerous writers and critics, including Alfred Döblin, Franz Kafka, Georg Lukács, F.T. Marinetti, and Vachel Lindsay. In the 1920s,

the fascination with a "life of things" on film became even more pronounced and constituted, "a key topos of film aesthetics in interwar Europe," as Miriam Hansen recently described it.[344] On one level, this continued fascination with the animation of things was merely a replay of earlier rhetoric, which looked to the new significance of objects in film as a way of legitimizing cinema as a unique and independent art form. In contrast to theater, that is, film could elevate what were once lifeless props and backdrops to the status of actors in the cinematic drama.[345] In the 1920s, however, cinema's ability to bring objects to life was also treated to more sophisticated, theoretical reflection and was situated in a differentiated manner with respect to various cinematic techniques of representation. While the broad interest in a "life of things" in both the theory and practice of 1920s cinema has been frequently acknowledged, little attempt has been made to draw relevant distinctions with respect to different theoretical approaches and modes of filmmaking.

Within German-language film theory of the 1920s, Béla Balázs's *Der sichtbare Mensch* presents probably the most well known articulation of a cinematic "life of things." Published in 1924, Balázs's book declares the unique atmosphere of cinema to arise out of its transformation of visible objects:

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[344] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, p. 346, note 67. In contrast to the present focus on animation, Hansen's discussion of things in film is indebted largely to Kracauer's sense of an opaque and stubborn "materiality" of things arising through photographic realism. See, in particular, Chapter 1 and Chapter 9 or her book: "Film, Medium of a Disintegrating World" (pp. 3–39) and "Theory of Film" (pp. 253–79), respectively. For a related application of Kracauer's film theory to postwar cinematic representations of everyday objects, see Lesley Stern, "Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): pp. 317–54.

[345] For an early example of this argument see, Egon Friedell, "Prolog vor dem Film" [1912], in *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1978), pp. 42–47. Friedell's text along with related, contemporaneous discussions of animated things in early cinema are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

> In der Welt des sprechenden Menschen sind die stummen Dinge viel lebloser und unbedeutender als der Mensch. [...] [Im Film] sind die Dinge nicht so zurückgesetzt und degradiert. *In der gemeinsamen Stummheit* werden sie mit dem Menschen fast homogen und gewinnen dadurch an Lebendigkeit und Bedeutung. Weil sie nicht weniger sprechen als die Menschen, darum sagen sie gerade so viel. Das ist das Rätsel jener besonderen Filmatmosphäre, die jenseits jeder literarischen Möglichkeit liegt.[346]

As Tobias Wilke has recently argued, Balázs's sense of the new significance of things on film is based on an operational transformation of the world into the realm of the purely optical. Humans and things in film and photography are not only cut off from a corresponding world of verbal language and sound, but also a range of synaesthetically correlated experiences, touch most notably.[347] For Balázs, this sensual impoverishment of the cinematic image is in fact the source of its unique effects. As purely visual phenomena, the moving images of humans and things in film become strangely akin, both exhibiting their own expressive "faces" and "physiognomies."[348] Balázs focuses, in particular, on the cinematic technique of the close-up shot as a means of intensifying the visual isolation of the human face and things, by tightly framing distinct objects and training the viewer attention on the expressive and otherwise unnoticed details of the visual world. In analogy to the expressive "Mienenspiel" of the human face, Balázs

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[346] Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* [1924] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 31–32 (emphasis in original). Balázs proclaims later in the book that, "die Lupe des Kinoapparates wird dir [...] das geheime – weil unbeachtete – Leben aller Dinge [zeigen]" (p. 49).

[347] See Tobias Wilke, *Medien der Unmittelbarkeit: Dingkonzepte und Wahrnehmungstechniken, 1918–1939* (Munich: Fink, 2010), pp. 52–62.

[348] See, for example, Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 59: "Es gibt keine Kunst, die so berufen wäre, dieses »Gesicht der Dinge« darzustellen, wie der Film. Weil er nicht nur eine einmalige, starre Physiognomie, sondern ihr geheimnisvoll-geheimes Mienenspiel zeigen kann."

describes the "*lebendige Physiognomie, die alle Dinge haben*."[349] This inherent, outer physiognomy of things, Balázs argues, could reveal an inner essence of objects when experienced through the cinematic close-up.

Balázs was not alone in essentializing the cinematic technique of the close-up in this manner. In a 1921 article, the French filmmaker and writer Jean Epstein extolled the close-up as the "soul" and "keystone" of cinema.[350] In a later text published the same year as Balázs's *Der sichtbare Mensch*, Epstein expressed his enthusiasm for the close-up in terms of its transformative effect on inanimate objects:

> The almost godlike importance assumed in close-ups by parts of the human body, or by the most frigid elements in nature, has often been noted. Through the cinema, a revolver in a drawer, a broken bottle on the ground, an eye isolated by an iris, are elevated to the status of characters in the drama (*la dignité du personnages du drame*). Being dramatic, they seem alive, as though involved in the evolution of an emotion. […] To things and beings in their most frigid semblance, the cinema thus grants the greatest gift unto death: life. And it confers this life in its highest guise: personality (*la personnalité*).[351]

Whether formulated in terms of Balázs's discussion of physiognomy or Epstein's *photogénie*, the animation of things through the cinematic close-up depended primarily on the photographic nature of cinema. While both writers stress the importance of an

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[349] Ibid., p. 59 (emphasis in original). See also, pp. 48–50. On the broader 1920s discourse that situated the revelatory potential of cinema in relation to the conjunction of the human face and the close-up shot, as well as its historical precedents in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science of physiognomy, nineteenth-century photography, and early cinema, see Tom Gunning, "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film," *Modernism/modernity* 4.1 (January 1997): pp. 1–29.

[350] See Jean Epstein, "Magnification" [1921], reprinted in translation in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, vol. 1: 1907–1929, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), pp. 235–41, here, p. 236. Balázs declares similarly in *Der sichtbare Mensch*: "Die Großaufnahmen sind das eigenste Gebiet des Films" (p. 49).

[351] Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*" [1924], in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 314–18, here pp. 316–17. For the French original, see "De quelques conditions de la photogénie," *Cinéa-Ciné-pour-tous* 19 (August 15, 1924): pp. 6–8, here p. 7.

object's inherent motion as a necessary component of the cinematic close-up, it is ultimately the role of photographic representation that accounts for the new character-status of things in cinema. "Was die Photographie nicht ausdrücken kann, das wird der Film nicht enthalten," as Balázs puts it.[352] For both Balázs and Epstein, there existed a latent physiognomy or personality in all nonliving things, which was revealed not through any artificial construction of cinematic movement but rather through the isolation and estrangement of things achieved through close-up photographic reproductions.

The close-up technique alone, however, was not sufficient for elevating things to the status of dramatic "characters" in film. As Gertrud Koch argues in an article on Balázs, the expressive physiognomy of things could only arise in close-ups if the effect of the shot was "embedded in the fictional relationship with a narrationally inscribed character."[353] The physiognomy or personality of things, that is to say, only has meaning in relation to a diegetic world of human characters and their emotions. Koch summarizes Balázs's understanding of film experience as a "kind of anthropomorphic visualization of objects, of inanimate things, [that] permits transforming the whole world of dead matter into an animistic cosmos, rendering it as pure expression."[354] Epstein, for his part, spoke directly of an "animistic tendency" (*tendance animiste*) in film, with its ability to attribute a "semblance of life" (*apparence de vie*) to things.[355] Yet for both writers, this radical

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[352] Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 95.

[353] See Gertrud Koch, "Béla Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things," *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): pp. 167–77, here p. 169.

[354] Ibid., p. 168.

vision of cinema was in fact couched in a more traditional mode of narrative filmmaking, which they both tirelessly championed. In the end, for both Balázs and Epstein, the "physiognomies" and "personalities" of things on film were primarily mirrors for the expressive emotions of human actors in the cinematic drama.[356]

It should perhaps go without saying that the avant-garde's approach to a "life of things" on film was a great deal different. In *Filmgegner von heute*, Richter himself openly mocked the cinematic actor's exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, which were so important Balázs and which provided the model for his notion of an expressive physiognomy of things.[357] Richter agreed that cinema altered the traditional hierarchy between humans and things. But rather than elevating things to the status of human-like characters, Richter saw the human actor as mere "Material" to be placed within the "Gesamtrhythmus des Films." "Der Wert des Schauspielers im Film," he continues, "ist relativ nicht größer als der irgendeines anderen im Film wirkenden Objekts."[358] Instead of an immediate *window* into an expressive, diegetic world of humans and things, the avant-garde treated the cinematic image as rather a productive *surface* for the

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[355] Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*," p. 316; "De quelques conditions de la photogénie," p. 7. For more on the animistic aspects of cinema with recourse to both Balázs and Epstein, see Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000).

[356] For Balázs, even cinematic motion was significant mainly as an "*Ausdrucksmittel*" or "*Symbol*" for the emotions of human characters in the narrative. See, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, p. 80.

[357] See Richter, *Filmgegner von* heute, pp. 99–105. Richter's larger conflict with Balázs was most directly played out during the 1929 meeting in La Sarraz, where he defended the abstraction of absolute film against Balázs's demands to make films that were comprehensible to the broader public. For a contemporaneous account of the exchange, see M.H.K Franken, "Het congres van den onafhankelijken film in La Sarraz," *Filmliga* 2 (1929): p. 115.

[358] Richter, *Filmgegner von* heute, p. 57.

constructive assembly of photochemically inscribed materials. In its rejection of both narrative and the expressive immediacy of photography, the avant-garde's approach to a cinematic "life of things" must be distinguished from the theories of Balázs and Epstein.[359]

In a 1929 article, "Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung," Richter singles out Fernand Léger's *Ballet mécanique* as an exemplary avant-garde transformation of the inanimate object. "Das Objekt, vorerst tote Dekoration," he writes, "wird bei [Léger] zum filmischen Lebewesen."[360] After quoting Léger's own emphatic critique of the narrative and literary aspects of film, Richter goes on to dismiss the animating potential of photographic representation. "An und für sich ist [...] der Gegenstand, sofern er nur einfach abfotografiert (gefilmt) ist, noch eine tote Sache," Richter writes.[361] Rather, it is only through the productive shaping of light and movement, he continues, that an object could be freed from a mere photographic reproduction of naturalistic appearances and movement and be elevated to a truly animate, "filmic being." Here, Richter resituates the cinematic animation of objects according to the earlier production aesthetics of absolute film, which understood the art of cinema (in Moholy-Nagy's words) as "Bewegungs-

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[359] In his discussion of Balázs, Tobias Wilke develops a reading of Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* as a reflection on the transformation of objects in film into a "ghostly" realm of optical isolation and untouchability. While I take issue with his close pairing of Balázs and Richter, my reading of avant-garde cinema is directly encouraged by Wilke's insistence on a self-reflective dimension to Richter's work. But rather than focus on the photographic close-up, I follow the avant-garde's avowed ambivalence toward the photographic nature of cinema and focus instead on animation and movement. This should not detract, however, from Wilke's valuable discussion of Balázs in relation to larger media-historical debates on an "immediate" perception of things. Cf. Wilke, *Medien der Unmittelbarkeit*, pp. 62–70.

[360] Richter, "Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung," *Die Form* 4.3 (1929): pp. 53–56, here p. 54.

[361] Ibid., p. 54.

beziehungen der Lichtprojektionen." Taking shape in relation to the specific productive capabilities of cinema, the animation of objects in the cinematic avant-garde, as I will show, also foregrounds the material operations of the cinematic apparatus itself, as well as the specific cinematic techniques used to animate things. If one can speak of an "animistic tendency" in the experience of cinematically animated objects, the avant-garde persistently undercuts and disrupts this experience by visibly demonstrating the material mechanisms behind the effects. Taking a hint from Richter's article, Léger's *Ballet mécanique* will prove an exemplary film for briefly explicating these issues.

Avant-Garde Animation

In a 1922 essay on the feature film *La Roue*, Léger described how, "the machine [a speeding locomotive] becomes *the leading character, the leading actor*. It will be Abel Gance's honor that he has successfully presented an *actor object* (*acteur objet*) to the public."[362] When Léger began work on his own film the following year, he expressly avoided developing a similarly dramatic "actor object" within a cinematic narrative. In unpublished notes taken down shortly after his 1923–24 production of *Ballet mécanique*, Léger claimed instead that the goal of avant-garde cinema was to "construct films without scenarios by treating *the moving image* [itself] as *the leading character* (*l'image mobile* comme *personnage principal*)."[363] Produced in collaboration with American

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[362] Fernand Léger, "*La Roue*: Its Plastic Quality" [1922], in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 271–74, here p. 272. (emphasis in original). For the French original, see Léger, "Essai critique sur la valeur plastique du film d'Abel Gance *La Roue*," in *Fonctions de la peinture* (Paris: Éditions Gonthier, 1965), pp. 160–63, here p. 160.

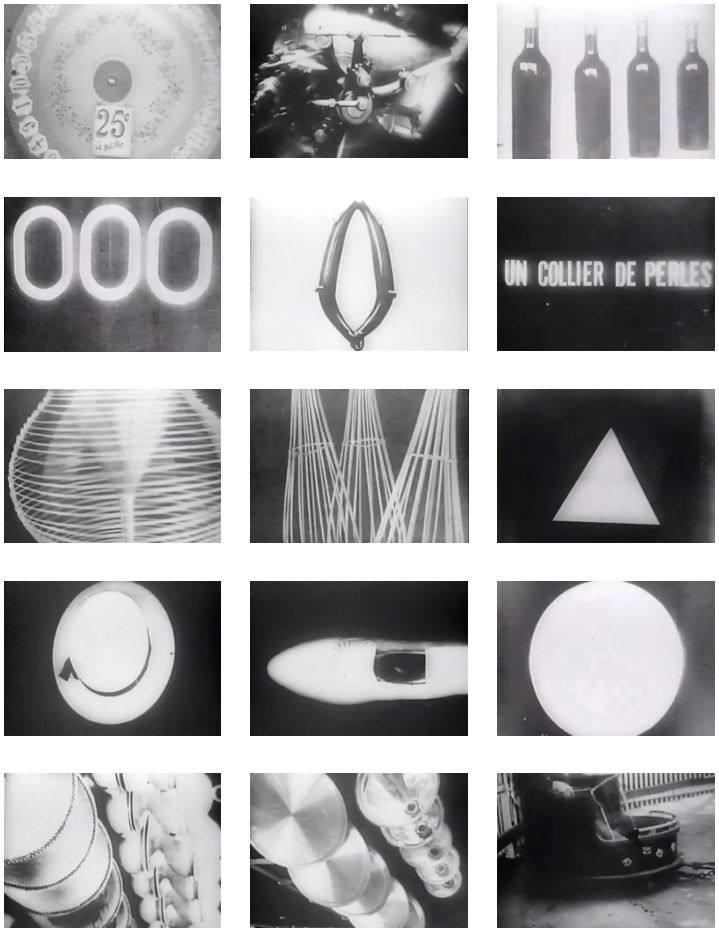

Figure 4.6a. Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy. *Ballet mécanique*, 1924. Film stills.

cameraman Dudley Murphy, *Ballet mécanique*'s "leading character" presents itself as a shocking and heterogeneous flurry of manufactured commodities, kitchen utensils, abstract shapes, numbers and text, moving machinery, amusement park rides, and isolated fragments of the human body and face (figure 4.6a). The disparate objects appear less significant in themselves than as mechanical components within the overall cinematic composition, linked together by visual rhythms (constructed both within and between individual shots) as well as abstract similarities of shape, shade, texture, and

[363] Fernand Léger, "*Ballet Mécanique*" [c. 1924], in *Functions of Painting*, ed. Edward F. Fry (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 48–51, here p. 49 (emphasis in original). For the French, see Léger, "Autour du *Ballet mécanique*," in *Fonctions de la peinture*, pp. 164–67, here p. 165.

composition. While Léger emulates the visual fragmentation and accelerated, rhythmical editing found in the opening train sequence of Gance's *La Roue*, his *Ballet mécanique* denies any reference or significance of his objects within a self-enclosed, diegetic world of human actors and things. Instead, by eliminating all "dramatic" and "emotional" content, Léger's film presents its leading character (the moving image) as a purely "plastic event" that confronts the cinematic viewer directly.[364]

In language similar to Balázs and Epstein's, Léger also essentialized the technique of the close-up as a means of animating things. In the same notes on *Ballet mécanique*, he writes: "I used the close-up, which is the only cinematographic invention. Fragments of objects were also useful; by isolating a thing you give it a *personality* (*personnalise*)."[365] Léger's film is indeed shot largely in close-up, functioning to optically isolate, estrange, and heighten the significance of objects (as theorized by Balázs and Epstein). But without a narrative context, Léger's use of close-up appears more in the spirit of what Tom Gunning has famously called the "cinema of attractions": "The enlargement is not a device expressive of narrative tension; it is in itself an attraction and the point of the film."[366] In a further resonance with the "attractions" of early cinema, Léger's *Ballet mécanique* contains close-ups of a woman's face—that of Man Ray's companion, Kiki de Montparnasse—which both stages and returns the gaze of the viewer, thus disrupting any

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[364] Léger's distinction between a dramatic, emotional, and plastic state of film can be found in "*La Roue*: Its Plastic Quality," pp. 271–72. For a broader reading of Léger's and the French cinematic avant-garde's reception of Gance's *La Roue*, see Standish Lawder's classic study, *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York UP, 1975), pp. 79–97.

[365] Léger, "*Ballet Mécanique*," p. 50 (my emphasis). "Autour du *Ballet mécanique*," p. 166.

[366] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" [1986], in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56–62, here p. 58.

voyeuristic absorption in the moving image with a direct exhibitionist appeal. If the close-ups on Kiki's face present any "personality," as Léger claims, it is certainly without an expressive "physiognomy" through which to read emotional depth. Her features are reduced rather to repetitive movements and a blank doll-like appearance. The overall "personality" of Léger's moving-image "character" emerges rather through an erotic resonance between the pervasive, machinic rhythms of the film and the fragmented close-ups on Kiki's mechanically blinking, smiling, and rotating face. Combining the direct eroticism of early cinema with the shocking, mechanical fragments of Gance's *La Roue*, Léger's *Ballet mécanique* presents a clear case of an exhibitionist cinema of attractions: a visually dynamic and shocking moving-image, which also looks back at the viewer.[367]

To focus on Léger's images mainly as visual attractions, however, would be to overlook the ways that the film visibly foregrounds its own means of production. The representation of animated objects in Léger's *Ballet mécanique* is not only a series of shocking attractions but also a self-reflection on the cinematic techniques and material apparatus behind the effects. To start with the close-up technique, the film does not simply tightly frame objects giving the viewer an immediate experience of the close-

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[367] Cinema's unique power of "making images seen," which marks Gunning's point of departure, is itself borrowed from Léger's essay on Gance's *La Roue*. While Gunning does not mention Léger's own film here, *Ballet mécanique* provides perhaps one of the most convincing connections between early cinematic attractions and the avant-garde. For Gunning's discussion of Léger as well as the exhibitionism of early and avant-garde cinema, see ibid., pp. 56–57. While it is beyond the scope of the present discussion, representations of the fragmented female body and stagings of the male gaze in films like *Ballet mécanique* and Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* demand a thorough feminist critique. Beyond more familiar critiques of the gaze, the focus on cinema as an "art of movement" also points toward a new field of critical feminist inquiry, which links 1920s cinema to modern dance. For work in this direction, see Michael Cowan, "Bewegungskunst," in *Hans Richters* Rhythmus 21, pp. 58–72; and, along with Barbara Hales, their special edition on dance and film of *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 46.3 (September 2010).

Figure 4.6b. Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy. *Ballet mécanique*, 1924. Film stills.

range vision of isolated fragments. Rather, Léger's close-ups are themselves additionally fragmented within the frame through the use of distorting optics as well as a portable aperture that is variously placed to isolate and obscure parts of Kiki's face. If isolated objects gain a "personality" in cinematic close-up, *Ballet mécanique* reveals this effect to be an artificial construction by making the isolating frame a material element of the film's visual content. Through the use of a prism or set of teleidoscopic mirrors, Léger's film demonstrates further that an object in close-up could just as easily be visually multiplied to form abstract compositions of moving light. In perhaps the most overtly self-reflective moment of the film, a reflective metallic sphere is filmed swinging along

the axis of the camera. Oscillating between an abstract composition of bending light and a convex reflection of the camera and its operator in the studio, the dynamic moving image reveals itself as but a product of selective framing and the manipulation of light and movement in front of a stationary camera (figure 4.6b).[368]

Beyond the coordinated use of photographic close-ups and mirrors, Léger's *Ballet mécanique* also engages directly with techniques of artificially constructed animation. In sequences that Richter himself points out in *Filmgegner von heute*, the film produces the semblance of autonomously moving things through a montage of still images (see figure 4.1). In the concluding section of the film, in particular, Léger presents an image-series of variously positioned mannequin legs, which, as the montage is accelerated, gives the impression of dancing legs. Establishing the images first as reproductions of stationary arrangements, Léger's film enables its viewers to perceive the mechanism behind the illusion, by showing how the separate static images only gradually coalesce into an animated thing.[369] The clearly missing phases of movement in the montage sequence

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[368] Postwar British avant-garde filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice credits this sequence in *Ballet mécanique* as, "the first direct reference to the machinery of cinema as part of the content of film." See Le Grice, "On Léger, Vertov and the Flicker Film" [1977], in *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), pp. 41–53, quoted here, p. 43.

[369] Here again, Léger's film might be understood as a replay and radicalization of early cinematic attractions. Rereading the myth of early responses to the first screenings of the Lumière brothers' *L' Arrivée d'un train à la gare de La Ciotat*, Tom Gunning explains how early cinema sought to astonish audiences by staging the transformation of a still projected image into an animated one. Rather than being terrified by a mistaken reality of the moving image, early audiences were thus prepared to experience the transformative power of the apparatus behind the illusion. See Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995), pp. 114–33. In his discussion of *L' Arrivée d'un train*, Gunning provides the following formulation, which parallels my understanding of avant-garde animation: "What is displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than the force of the cinematic apparatus. Or to put it better, the one demonstrates the other" (p. 118).

serve as a visually irritating reminder that the experience of a meaningful animation of things (the experience of "dancing" or "nodding," for example) is as much a product of the viewer as it is of the cinematic apparatus itself. The viewer's animistic imagination is provoked even further by the replication of similar, rhythmic movements with objects like wine bottles and kitchen utensils, which bear no direct anthropomorphic resemblance.

In its self-reflective treatment of the close-up frame and animation sequence, *Ballet mécanique* also points to cinema's material substrate: the serial frames of the celluloid filmstrip. The film's strategies of spatial and temporal fragmentation, that is to say, already suggest to the viewer a sense of the static sequence of frames behind the illusion. In the film's famous loop of a washerwoman climbing a set of stairs, Léger confronts the viewer even more directly with the materiality of the animated image (with its basis in repeatable, photographic inscription and the splicing together of celluloid strips). As Rudolf Kurtz indicates in his 1926 study *Expressionismus und Film*, the irritating rhythmic repetition of the woman's movements in *Ballet mécanique* provokes the viewer to intuit the film's materiality. Describing the looped movements in a long, fragmented, and repeating sentence, Kurtz's text in fact verbally performs this visual irritation for the reader before ending with the sudden realization of the sequence's material construction:

> [eine alte Frau] marschiert plötzlich einen Feldweg herauf, grüßt freundlich winkend, erreicht das Ziel und ist plötzlich wieder am Anfang, strebt emsig hinauf, grüßt freundlich, ist aufatmend oben und beginnt wieder unermüdlich zu steigen [...] und wieder, unten, oben, unten, oben, unten, winkend, lächelnd, anfangsfreudig, oben, unten . . . *das Filmband ist ein Dutzendmal aneinander geklebt*.[370]

In Kurtz's performative reconstruction of the viewer's experience, Léger's calculated loop-sequence thus succeeds not only in producing shock; the viewer also comes to a sudden recognition of the effect's material basis.

In his 1923 film *Retour à la raison*, Man Ray drew attention to the materiality of film just as forcefully through a direct animation of things.[371] As Noam Elcott carefully describes, Man Ray used a cameraless technique similar to his still photograms or "rayographs," producing segments of the film by placing small objects like thumbtacks, pins, salt crystals, and coiled wire directly on celluloid filmstrips before exposing them to light in his darkroom.[372] When cinematically projected, the rayographically inscribed filmstrips (printed in both positive and negative) appear as frenetic and rhythmically animated things, alternating between the visual "noise" and fragmentation of salt and pins, on the one hand, and a synthesized image of animated tacks and springs, on the other (figure 4.7). As Richter well recognized, Man Ray approached photography not as a means of objectively reproducing external realities but rather as "lichtempfindliches Material" for the productive shaping of new, visual experiences though interactions of

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[370] Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, pp. 104–5 (emphasis added).

[371] *Retour à la raison* would itself have considerable influence on *Ballet mécanique* through cameraman Dudley Murphy's close association with Man Ray. On this connection, see Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Man Ray's Films: From Dada to Surrealism," in *Avant-Garde Film*, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 93–104, here pp. 95–96.

[372] See Noam M. Elcott, "Darkened Rooms: A Genealogy of Avant-Garde Filmstrips from Man Ray to the London Film-Makers' Co-op and Back Again," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008): pp. 6–37. Here, Elcott provides a historically and conceptually rich discussion of Man Ray's filmstrips and their important legacy in relation to postwar British and American, "material" or "structural" films. On the production of *Retour à la raison*, see also Man Ray's own account in his autobiography, *Self Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1963), p. 260.

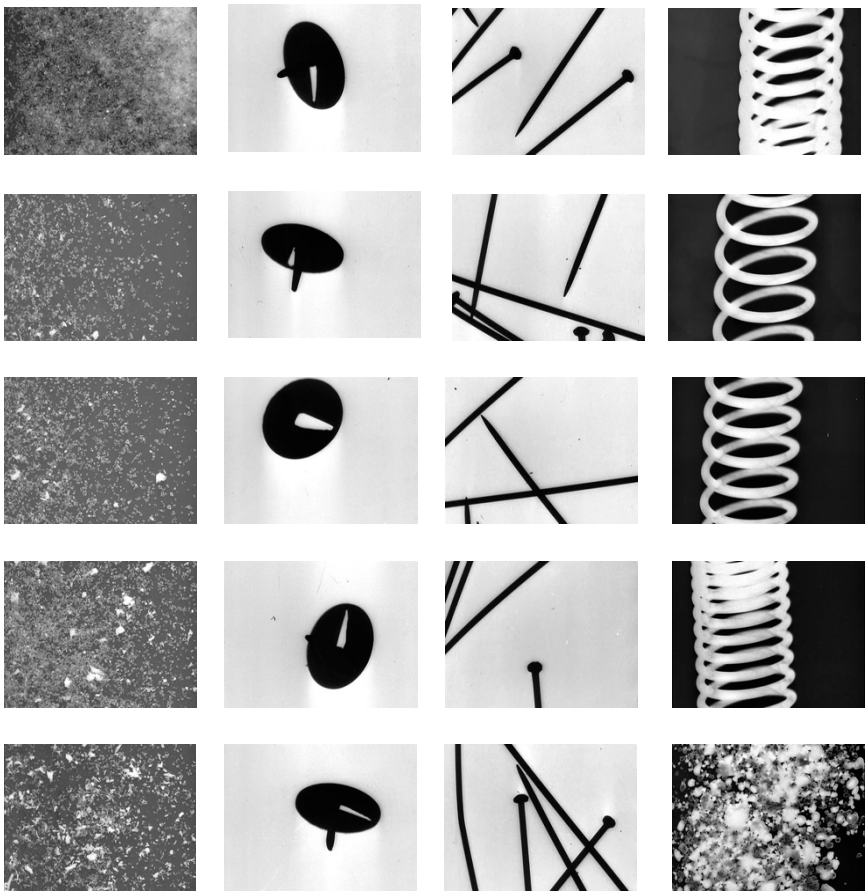

Figure 4.7. Man Ray. *Retour à la raison*, 1923. Film stills.

light, material substrates, and developing and printing techniques.[373] Through a related, productive use of cinematic materials, Man Ray's *Retour à la raison* bases its perceptual effects on the materiality of the celluloid filmstrip and, as a result, underlines an inherent tension between the fragmentation of the film-frame series and its synthesis in the projected image.[374] While the materiality of the filmstrip itself is not directly visible in

[373] Richter, "Der Amerikaner Man Ray … ," *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* 3 (June 1924): p. 42. Here, Richter describes a new "photographische Kultur" arising from material experiments with "Papier, Platte, Film, Entwicklungsessenzen, [und] Vervollkommnung der Kopiertechnik."

the projected image, the seemingly incidental and contrasting rhythms of the rayographed sequences indeed suggest the inner tension between fragmentation and synthesis in film, allowing the viewer to experience the objects as both a rapid, mechanical presentation of fragmented stills and a synthesized image that coalesces into an animated thing. In a recent article, Samantha Lackey describes *Retour à la raison* as a fragmented "series of small jolts," but points to the rayographed sequences as a unique complication of the overall shock-effect of the film. In these sequences, she explains, the viewer is effectively suspended between experiencing an "illusion of movement" and "a series of discontinuous still images of the same objects."[375] With the viewer's attention fixed on the rayographed pins, thumbtacks, and springs, the objects' fragmentary and shocking rhythms provoke a heightened awareness of the paradoxical nature of cinematically produced animation.

This analysis of cinematic animation indeed complicates more familiar readings of interwar avant-garde cinema. Through the influence of Walter Benjamin's *Kunstwerk* essay, the notion of shock has long been a dominant category for understanding the

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[374] As Noam Elcott correctly emphasizes, the raw materiality of the rayographed filmstrips must be distinguished from the immateriality of their fleeting, projected image. While the material nature of Man Ray's film was rediscovered within the context of postwar experimental cinema, it went unacknowledged throughout the 1920s. During the period of the historical avant-garde, as Elcott convincingly argues, it was only through Man Ray's more famous still photograms that the material substrate of the film was made directly legible for the viewer. One such photogram, rayographically inscribed with an uncoiled filmstrip-role of *Retour à la raison*, appears on the cover of Richter's special 1926 issue on film of *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*. See Elcott, "Darkened Rooms," pp. 22–28. One might also point to the first illustration in *Filmgegner von heute* where Richter reproduces in actual size a folded filmstrip from V.I. Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), revealing the sprocket holes, edge lettering, gaps between frames, and transparency of the material strip. See *Filmgegner von heute*, p. 7.

[375] See Samantha Lackey, "'A series of fragments': Man Ray's *Le Retour à la raison* (1923)," in *Between Still and Moving Images*, ed. Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon (New Barnet, Herts, UK: John Libbey, 2012), pp. 59–70, quoted here, p. 65.

perceptual effects of avant-garde film.[376] As my readings have hopefully demonstrated, however, the shock-effects of avant-garde cinema cannot always be taken as ends in themselves. Rather, they are frequently part of a larger, avant-garde strategy of demonstrating the work's material construction. In his book *Theorie der Avantgarde,* Peter Bürger notes the tendency of the avant-garde work to proclaim itself openly as an "artificial construction" (*künstliches Gebilde*) and explains further how the experience of "*Schock*" produced by the work—along with its refusal to provide any coherent meaning—provokes the viewer instead to determine the "*Konstruktionsprinzipien*" behind the effect.[377] Like Benjamin, Bürger relates this dynamic most vividly to the raw material constructions of collage paintings by Dadaists like Kurt Schwitters (and by the Cubist painters before him).[378] Yet when turning to film, Bürger stresses rather the incompatibility of the technological medium with such experiential dynamics, noting how cinema tends to obscure or make undetectable its material construction.[379] The

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[376] In an early essay, Anton Kaes, for example, draws on Benjamin to describe the films of Richter, Léger, and Clair as aimed at the perceptual "Verblüffung, Verwirrung und Schock" of the viewer. See his, "Verfremdung als Verfahren: Film und Dada," in *Sinn aus Unsinn: Dada International*, ed. Wolfgang Paulsen and Helmut G. Hermann (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1982), pp. 71–83, here p. 80. Just recently, Andrés Mario Zervigón's work on John Heartfield has put Benjamin's discussion of shock to productive use in understanding the attraction of cartoon animation for the avant-garde. See his, "'A Political Struwwelpeter?'," in *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image* (2012), pp. 95–135.

[377] Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 97 and 109.

[378] See ibid., pp. 99–104. In his elusively brief discussion of Dadaist shocks in the *Kunstwerk* essay, Benjamin makes limited reference to the "Wortsalat" of Dadaist poetry as well as a Schwitters-like painting with "Knöpfe oder Fahrscheine" mounted on the canvas. See Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, *Werke und Nachlaß*, vol. 16, p. 243.

[379] See Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 104. Thomas Elsaesser argues similarly about cinema's tendency to hide or make "fantasmatic" its own material components and instead finds

foregrounding of materiality, that is to say, supposedly dissipates with the fleeting, temporal effects of cinema. This contrast between film and the avant-garde artwork, however, only makes sense when failing to consider closely the actual films of the cinematic avant-garde. Even in their films, the avant-garde develops complex, representational strategies for correlating perceptual shock-effects with a self-reflexive demonstration of the effect's construction.

Benjamin, for his part, never directly addresses the films of the European avant-garde, but asserts rather a "tactical" (*taktisch*) connection between the "moral" shock-effect of Dada poetry and painting, on the one hand, and a more popularized, "physical shock-effect" (*physische Chockwirkung*) of cinema, on the other.[380] For Benjamin and those following him, the link between avant-garde provocations and the mass medium of cinema is made possible through their shared technique of montage, which could produce jarring and estranging juxtapositions, whether in the spatial constructions of Dadaist collage painting and photomontage or the rapid, temporal sequences of cinematic montage. Yet as Miriam Hansen points out, Benjamin's approach to cinema also moves well beyond the aesthetic strategies of the European avant-garde to include concerns over photographic indexicality and psychological mechanisms of identification, as well as

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the overt constructions of the avant-garde work exemplified rather by Duchamp's ready-mades and meta-cinematic machines. See Elsaesser, "Dada/Cinema?," in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, pp. 13–27, quoted here, p. 25.

[380] As Tobias Wilke explains, Benjamin's account of the related "tactile" (*taktisch*) shock-effects of Dada and film coincides with a "tactical" (*taktisch*) alignment, whereby cinema takes over the avant-garde's task of tactically training and reorganizing human perception but on a much larger scale of collective, mass audiences. See Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed." Wilke's work restores this important double meaning of the word "*taktisch*," which had become obscured in German editions and translations of Benjamin's writings. Cf. the early (1st) 1935 and later (3rd) 1936–39 versions, quoted here, in Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk*, pp. 86 and 243–44, respectively.

engagements with empirical realities and the propagandistic potentials of cinema. In this sense, she explains, "Benjamin advocates an avant-gardist film aesthetics that is less constructivist than citational, iconoclastic, and transformative, closer to Vertov and Vigo than, say, Richter, Eggeling, or even Léger and Murphy."[381] As Hansen notes elsewhere, one must also stress Benjamin's affinity with certain aspects of the montage aesthetics of Eisenstein, whose *Battleship Potemkin* directly inspired a passage in the *Kunstwerk* essay.[382] For Benjamin, that is to say, the shocking somatic effects of cinema have to be thought in complex relationship with the photographic and political content of films like those of the experimental Soviet cinema.

In contrast to Benjamin's film aesthetics or the works of Vertov and Eisenstein, the European avant-garde approached cinematic montage in a far more basic and directly material manner. Introducing the technique in *Filmgegner von heute*, Richter situates montage as simply one means of rhythmically animating objects (in addition to the movements of the camera and the object itself) (figure 4.8). Juxtaposing an image of hands splicing together film with an arrangement of montage stills, Richter's static presentation ties the suggested animation of the thing (a spinning alarm clock) to its

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[381] A rich discussion of Benjamin's film aesthetics can be found throughout Hansen's extensive writings. For a concise statement on the above issues along with the quoted passage, see *Cinema and Experience*, p. 200. As Anton Kaes correctly points out, the seemingly chaotic juxtapositions of European avant-garde films must be distinguished as well from the narrative, symbolic, and propagandistic function of montage in contemporaneous Soviet cinema. See Kaes, "Verfremdung als Verfahren," p. 80.

[382] See Miriam Hansen, "Of Lightning Rods, Prisms, and Forgotten Scissors: *Potemkin* and German Film Theory," *New German Critique* 95 (Spring–Summer 2005): pp. 162–79. The passage in question originates in a 1927 reply to a review of Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and includes Benjamin's famous formulation about cinema's relationship to the "prison-world" of modern life: "Da kam der Film und hat diese Kerkerwelt mit dem Dynamit der Zehntelsekunden gesprengt." See Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk*, pp. 130 and 240; and the 1927 reply to Oscar A.H. Schmitz, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 751–55.

Wir montieren!

Bewegung und immer wieder Bewegung!
Das bewegte Objekt — die bewegte Kamera — und:
Bewegung durch Montage.
Montage, das heißt sinnvolles Aneinanderfügen verschiedener Stücke Film zu einer berechneten Wirkung

Bewegung, rein durch Montage:
ein Gegenstand ist zum Beispiel von mehreren Seiten aufgenommen worden. Durch Aneinanderkleben von kurzen Stücken dieser Filmaufnahmen kann der Gegenstand scheinbar gedreht werden.

Je nach der Art des Schneidens und Klebens ist die Drehung verschieden: schneller, langsamer, links- und rechtsherum — ganz nach dem Wunsch des Regisseurs.

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Figure 4.8. Hans Richter. *Filmgegner von heute*, 1929. Page reproduction.

material substrate in a manner complementary to the fragmentary, moving animations of Man Ray and Léger. In an earlier, shorter version of his 1929 text, "Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung," Richter states directly that the choice of the depicted thing is largely arbitrary, so long as it is constructed and rediscovered as a plastic, "cinematic object." First published in Czech in 1928 and later in French in 1930, Richter's article, with a title that translates as "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," makes reference to not only *Ballet mécanique* but also Man Ray's 1926 film *Emak Bakia*, which includes the same

rayographed sequences as *Retour à la raison*. Such avant-garde films, Richter argues, succeed in making the first steps toward a "discovery of the cinematic object" (*Entdeckung des filmischen Gegenstands*) by "denaturalizing" (*denaturalisieren*) the normal movement of things according to the laws of cinema.[383]

Denied any narrative significance or ostensible meaning in themselves, the animated objects of avant-garde cinema become rather the focal points for the viewer's self-reflective experience of cinematic movement. Animated objects (like the mannequin legs in *Ballet mécanique* or the spinning thumbtacks in *Retour à la raison*) serve as a nexus for such reflections given their visibly ambiguous status as both formal, artificial constructions of rhythmic movement and seemingly animate "*Lebewesen*" (to use Richter's language). With regard to denaturalized motion and rhythm, Richter contests any hard distinction between the photographically based films of Man Ray and Léger and the purely abstract animations that he and Eggeling produced. In "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," Richter states: "Ich sehe keinen Unterschied zwischen den neuen Filmen, die *natürliche Gegenstände* benutzen, und solchen, die reine, sog. *abstrakte Formen* verwenden."[384] In the same 1928 article, however, he quickly revises this position by contrasting the "unambiguous expression" (*eindeutiger Ausdruck*) of abstract forms with

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[383] The article was first published in Czech as "Predmet V Pohybu," *Studio* 2 (1928): pp. 46–47; and later, slightly abridged, in French as "L'objet en mouvement," *Cercle et Carré* 3 (June 30, 1930). A German translation of the Czech version is reprinted as "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," in Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 42–43, quoted here, p. 42: "Der neue Film beruht in der Entdeckung der natürlichen Gesetze der Kinematografie [...]. In ihren Filmen *Ballet mécanique* und *Emak Bakia* machten Léger und Man Ray die ersten überraschenden Schritte zur Entdeckung des filmischen Gegenstands. Statt des Szenariums einer naturalistisch-theaterhaften Handlung die plastisch reale Form. [...] Theoretisch ist es gleichgültig, was für ein Gegenstand für den Film gewählt wird, entscheidend dabei ist nur, wie er sich bewegt, welche Art der Bewegung für ihn gefunden wird."

[384] Richter, "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," p. 43.

the "associations" (*Assoziationen*) and "contingencies" (*Zufälligkeiten*) that come with photographic representations of external objects.[385] As Richter later indicates in *Filmgegner von heute*, the use of photographic objects in his own cinematic works of the late 1920s produce experiences of motion and feeling, which are not precisely calculable but rather contingent upon the viewer's own associative and imaginative involvement in the moving image.[386]

Despite or because of their differing effects, Richter declares both abstract, animated forms and the movement of photographed objects as essential components in the "film of tomorrow" (*Film von morgen*).[387] Appearing the same year as "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," the 1928 film *Vormittagsspuk* embodies most decisively these contrasting tendencies in Richter's exploration of cinematic movement. In the concluding section, I will discuss the productive tensions that arise in *Vormittagsspuk* between abstract constructions of formal rhythms, on the one hand, and the viewer's active and associative participation in the film's photographic content, on the other. What I earlier described as a widened rift in avant-garde cinema—between the well-ordered, formal construction of abstract animation and an unruly life of animated things on the level of content—will appear in *Vormittagsspuk* as a deliberate, aesthetic strategy for

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[385] Ibid.

[386] See Richter's section of the book, "Assoziationen bilden!," in *Filmgegner von heute*, pp. 79–89. In contrast to the logical "associations of ideas" (*Ideenassoziationen*) found in the Soviet montage (pp. 80–81), Richter highlights the motion-based "associations of feeling" (*Gefühlsassoziationen*) provoked by his 1928 films *Rennsymphonie* and *Filmstudie* (pp. 88–89). The images selected from *Rennsymphonie* illustrate associations of tactile motion, while those from *Filmstudie* suggest the transformative and poetic potential of movements associated on a purely visual level. For the latter, see figure 4.1.

[387] Richter, "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," p. 43.

empowering viewers in relation to the moving image. Under the influence of filmmakers like Léger, Man Ray, and René Clair, Richter's late 1920s work developed beyond the precise, formal construction of abstract rhythms. Just as important became the viewer's active participation in the visual content of cinematic work. In addition to the "very deliberate, very calculated mobility and rhythm" of animated objects, emphasized by Léger in his notes to *Ballet mécanique*, avant-garde film had to distinguish itself as well through the "imagination and play" (*la fantaisie et le jeu*) that it offered its viewers.[388]

Animating Rhythms

Produced for the 1928 *Deutsche Kammermusik* festival in Baden-Baden, Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* emerged in collaboration with Werner Graeff (co-writer of *Filmgegner von heute*) as well as Paul Hindemith, who composed the now lost, accompanying music for the film.[389] According to a 1928 interview with Hindemith, the producers of *Vormittagsspuk* considered the work: "eine Abart des abstrakten Films, bei dem

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[388] Léger, "*Ballet Mécanique*," p. 49–50. "Autour du *Ballet mécanique*," p. 165–66. In the same notes, Léger makes the telling remark that any future of avant-garde film will lie in the "limitless possibilities" of "animation" (*le Dessin Animé*). See the English and French versions, pp. 51 and 167, respectively. Even when working with photographic and live-action images, the freedom of animation played a crucial role in inspiring the avant-garde's cinematic imagination and experimentation with representational strategies and rhythmic techniques.

[389] For details and documentation on the first screenings of *Vormittagsspuk*, see Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 95–98. Appearing around the time that the dominance of sound film was established, the different screenings of *Vormittagsspuk* hold an interesting position with regard to shifting debates on film music in response to synchronized sound (first screening with accompaniment on mechanical piano in 1928 and at the same festival a year later with the music recorded on sound film). On Hindemith's position within this historical context, see Michael Beiche, "Musik und Film im deutschen Musikjournalismus der 1920er Jahre," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 63.2 (2006): pp. 94–119. Little can be said about *Vormittagsspuk*'s music itself, however, as neither the sound version of the film nor Hindemith's score survives.

Menschen nur Staffage bedeuten werden."[390] Beyond this abstract use of human figures, the film is most recognizable for its animation of objects, a feature highlighted even more prominently in the original 1928 title of the film: *Bewegte Gegenstände*.[391] While the interaction between human figures and animated objects is an obvious focus in most readings of the film, little serious attention has been paid to the exact constructions and effects of the differing movements of humans and things. Given Richter's complex consideration of cinematic animation and its effects, *Vormittagsspuk* must be read with a close eye to the distinctions and interactions between not only the production of movement and the imparting of "life" to objects, but also the animating effects of cinematic rhythms on the viewer's body.

Prior readings of *Vormittagsspuk* frequently address the interaction between humans and animated objects as an allegory for the social and political upheavals of the 1920s. Richter's own retrospective comments have largely encouraged such readings, as does the introductory note he later added to the surviving version of the film: "The Nazis destroyed the sound version of this film as 'degenerate art.' It shows that even objects revolt against regimentation."[392] Furthermore, *Vormittagsspuk* has been commonly

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[390] See Lotte Eisner's article, "Kammermusik oder Filmmusik – die Hauptsache ist gute Musik: Ein Gespräch mit Professor Paul Hindemith," *Film-Kurier* 155 (June 30, 1928), reprinted in Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, quoted here p. 96.

[391] *Vormittagsspuk* was initially the alternate, second title of the film and only became the primary title with the work's rescreening as a sound film in 1929. See ibid., p. 95.

[392] See also the account of the film in Richter's postwar reconstruction of the international avant-garde, *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1964), p. 203: "[*Vormittagsspuk*] zeigte Rebellion der Objekte, der Hüte, Tassen, Krawatten, Schläuche etc. gegen den Menschen. Schließlich stellte sich dann die alte Rangordnung des Menschen-Herrn über die Objekt-Sklaven wieder her. Aber für diese kurze Zeit mag doch ein Zweifel an der Allgültigkeit der gewöhnlichen Subjekt-Objekt-Ordnung im Publikum eingetreten sein."

situated as marking a major shift in Richter's cinematic production, from an earlier interest in abstraction, animation, and rhythm to a broader exploration of live-action photography, figurative imagery, and quasi-narrative content. Marion von Hofacker references *Vormittagsspuk*'s photographic imagery, in particular, as evidence of Richter's departure from earlier, aesthetic concerns of the *Rhythmus* films and to an explicit engagement with contemporaneous, sociopolitical events.[393] As should be clear by now, however, Richter's interest in movement and animation was not limited to his early abstract films. Without denying any subversive, political intent to *Vormittagsspuk*, I wish to reestablish its position among Richter's films as both a continuation and significant transformation of his earlier experiments with cinema as an "art of movement."

In forwarding her political reading of *Vormittagsspuk*, von Hofacker refers to a revealing 1972 interview with Richter, where he discusses the production of the film:

> We all had bourgeois bowler hats like the businessmen wore in Wall Street or in London. So we put black strings through the bowler hats, a piece of cardboard inside, a long stick, and swung these bowler hats in front of the camera. And it looked awfully nice. It looked like a swarm of pigeons. We mobilized any other objects. We tried to de-naturalize the natural movement of the objects. And we studied their movements. In other words, we got into the swing of the thing, into the swing of their lives. And we studied their lives and we conversed with them, so to say. In playing with them, in letting them do what they want, suddenly a kind of rhythm developed which became a kind of political satire.[394]

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[393] Due to its "concrete images and narrative content," von Hofacker aligns Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* more with his overtly political films like the didactic essay-film *Inflation* (1928) or the unfinished semi-documentary *Metall* (1931–33). See Marion von Hofacker, "Richter's Films and the Role of the Radical Artist, 1927–1941," in Foster (ed.), *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 122–59, here p. 124; and for her political, allegorical reading of *Vormittagsspuk*, see pp. 131–36. While I do not follow this line of argumentation here, it should be noted that Foster's volume as a whole does an admirable job of restoring the importance of Richter's substantial, political and organizational activities for his experimental aesthetics.

[394] Richter's comments are reproduced in Barbara Frances Lass's dissertation, "Hans Richter: Film Artist" (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1987), pp. 107–8. Von Hofacker's bibliographic and citation errors have been corrected here. Cf. von Hofacker, pp. 132 and 157.

Von Hofacker hones in on the comment about "political satire," and indeed, as she explains, the figure of the flying hat in the film has a rich history as a symbol of individual and social crisis from Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* to the films of Charlie Chaplin. (On Chaplin's famous derby hat, for example, Walter Benjamin notes: "seine Melone, die auf dem Kopf keinen festen Ort mehr hat, verrät, daß die Herrschaft der Bourgeoisie wackelt."[395]) While a metaphoric reading of the flying hat is valid, I would like to focus instead on Richter's description of the moving image's production: the denaturalizing and animistic play with the movement of things and the imaginative generation of visual associations.

Like Léger's and Man Ray's films, Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* is particularly striking for the way it foregrounds its means of animating objects and makes this part of the film's visual content. A similarly percussive and temporally fragmented animation of

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Contrary to von Hofacker's claim, the source of the interview is not unknown, but originates in Cecile Starr's short 1972 film-interview with Richter (four years before his death), titled "Richter on Film" and included on the video release, *Hans Richter: Early Avant-Garde Films* (New York: Arthouse, 1996). As a rule, I have avoided relying on Richter's extensive, post-WWII writings and commentary on his avant-garde production of the 1920s. The vast majority of scholarship on Richter is marred by an uncritical replication of Richter's self-mythologizing interpretations of his own work, stressing a teleology of aesthetic progress with his shift from painting to film, as well as questionable accounts of his roles in various avant-garde movements and provocations. See, for example, Richter, "Easel–Scroll–Film," *Magazine of Art* 45 (Feb. 1952): pp. 78–86; "Dada und Film," in *Dada: Monographie einer Bewegung*, ed. Willy Verkauf (Teufen: Arthur Niggli, 1958), pp. 57–67; as well as *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst* (1964). An exception is made here, however, where Richter addresses in concrete terms the manner of producing his films.

[395] See von Hofacker, "Richter's Films and the Role of the Radical Artist," pp. 133. Quoted here is Walter Benjamin, "Hitlers herabgeminderte Männlichkeit" [1934], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 103–4, here p. 104. The flying hat as a symbol of personal crisis appears in Schubert's "Der Lindenbaum" (with text by Wilhelm Müller) from the *Winterreise* song cycle (1827). To von Hafacker's examples, we might also add the flying hat in Jakob van Hoddis's famous "Weltende" (1911), a poem that Richter would have been intimately familiar with from his early days in expressionist circles.

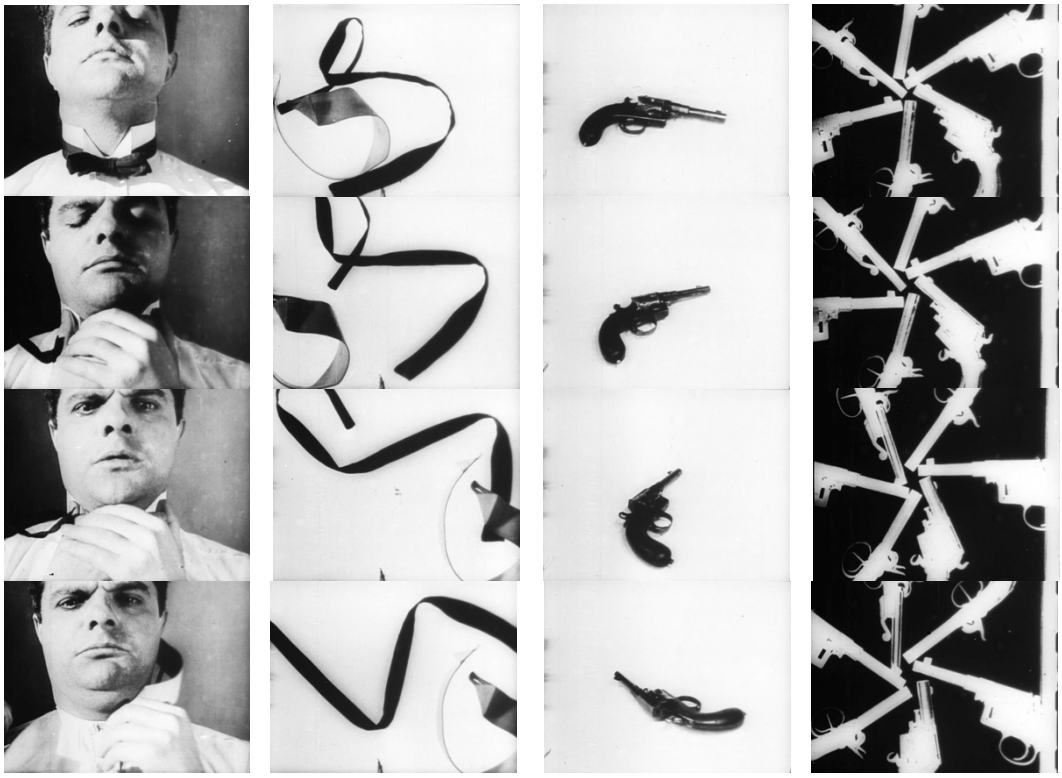

Figure 4.9. Hans Richter. *Vormittagsspuk*, 1928. Film stills.

things can be found in Richter's stop-motion sequences of a rotating bowtie and collar and a collection of pistols. While the animation is more seamless than in Léger's and Man Ray's films, a related self-reflective gesture is clearly at work. After a stop-motion sequence showing a bowtie coming magically undone against the will of its wearer, Richter animates the same collar and tie alone on a bare white surface as if to demonstrate the technique to the viewer. And the sequences of animated pistols appear in both positive and negative prints, suggesting the illusion's basis as but a photochemical reality (figure 4.9). With its animation of the flying bowler hats, Richter's film also enters into a different territory of live-action filming. But here too, the basis of the illusion is revealed to the viewer. The means of animating the hats is clearly inscribed in the image-content of the film through the visible inclusion of the strings and long sticks that were

a. **b.**

Figure 4.10. Hans Richter. *Vormittagsspuk*, 1928. Film stills.

used to suspend and manipulate the hats (figure 4.10a). The cameraman's struggle to keep the flying hats in view also underscores that their apparent animation is simply the effect of visual isolation and framing, achieved by the coordinated movements of the suspended objects and a portable camera. It would be a mistake to take this all as simply a shortcoming of the film, however. Richter's work is intentionally *not* an illusionary cinema.

While *Vormittagsspuk* clearly foregrounds its means of animating things, the film also encourages the viewer to participate in these constructed movements. The flying hats are frequently framed so that only the human actor's hands can be seen reaching to subdue the rebellious objects (figure 4.10b). The viewer is therefore able to identify with the chase and get "into the swing of the thing, into the swing of their lives" just like Richter and his crew. The animistic play behind the production of the film is thus *re-*

produced in the viewer's embodied experience of the projected movements. As Richter notes in *Filmgegner von heute*, the difference between artificial and natural motion is erased through the "feeling" (*Gefühl*) of cinematic movement.[396] *Vormittagsspuk* exploits this insight as a general productive principle by purposefully denaturalizing the movements of objects through cinematic techniques of camera movement, editing, slow and reverse motion, as well as stop-motion animation. The result is a dynamic series of animated objects, which draw the viewer in with their playful and flowing rhythms of repetition and reversal: windows open and shut, hoses unwind and magically coil back up, a tea set smashes to the ground and later leaps back into the air unbroken, etc.[397]

As Tom Gunning has recently argued, cinematic motion "need not be realistic to have a 'realistic' effect, that is, to invite the empathic participation, both imaginative and physiological, of viewers."[398] The denaturalizing animation of objects in Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* engages the viewer in very similar ways. Like René Clair's account of the viewer becoming an "active person," Richter's audience is invited to take part in the

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[396] Richter, *Filmgegner von heute*, p. 89.

[397] With its use of playful repetitions and trick techniques, Richter's film converges with aspects of Benjamin's notion of a filmic "*Spielraum*." Avant-garde works like Richter's, however, lack an emphasis on photographic indexicality, which is crucial for Benjamin's related conception of the "optical unconscious." See, in particular the 2nd version of *Das Kunstwerk*, pp. 130–33 and the note on mimesis, pp. 119–21. For a detailed discussion of the concept of play in Benjamin's film aesthetics, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): pp. 3–45.

[398] Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18.1 (2007): pp. 29–52, here p. 46. Gunning's theoretical discussion of movement and animation in cinema (in contrast to its photographic nature), as he makes clear, has historical precedent in the theory and practice of 1920s avant-garde cinema. While Gunning does not mention Richter, the filmmaker's late 1920s writings on cinema present remarkably similar arguments to Gunning's about the "realistic" effects of artificially produced motion. Cf. *Filmgegner von heute*, pp. 28–33; and "Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung," p. 56.

moving image, identifying with the embodied, physiological movements involved in chasing after the animated objects. The viewer's imaginative participation is also encouraged as the sequences of flowing and repeating animations suggest a whole array of visual associations, which multiply far beyond the birds and flying hats mentioned in Richter's retrospective comments to include coiled hoses, clocks, targets, balls, ladders, and legs. Critics have frequently noted the surreal and dream-like nature of these resemblances, but rarely identify the crucial importance of motion for tying them together. If *Vormittagsspuk* achieves a sort of animistic empathy and imagination with respect to the "lives" of things, as Richter's retrospective comments suggest, this is achieved through the viewer's playful involvement in the film's denaturalized movements and rhythms.

In general, the individual animated objects in Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* appear in longer sequences with flowing trajectories. At the same time, these individual animation sequences are perpetually interrupted in the film by staccato, formal rhythms achieved through rapid editing. In a deliberate inversion, the flowing movements of animated things are frequently disrupted by regular, mechanical rhythms constructed from images of human actors: repetitive movements of men marching in unison, aiming guns, searching, crawling, boxing, and climbing ladders. (The clear overtones of regimentation and militarism in the film's representation of humans indeed make one quick to side with the rebellious objects![399]) This conflict is played out as well, on an abstract formal level,

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[399] As von Hofacker notes, Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* originated with a script by his collaborator Werner Graeff involving a "rebellion of revolvers." Richter opposed and modified the script, arguing that revolvers that rebel would not shoot and instead added numerous other animated objects to this initial motif. See von Hofacker, pp. 131–32.

through the contrasting, rhythmic movements themselves: an animated and flowing "play" of things, on the one hand, and an accelerated, regular cadence associated with the movements of humans. The reflexive device of the clock, which both begins and ends the film, encompasses both of these rhythmic regimes. At times, it ticks in regular cadence in quick cuts along with the mechanical rhythms of the human actors. Appearing in between longer sequences of animated things, however, the changing position of the clock hands indicates a stretching, compression, or reversal of time commensurate with the objects' denaturalized movements. At the same time, the clock also figures throughout the film as an extra-diegetic element aligned with the mechanical workings of the cinematic apparatus itself. It ticks off a duration of time at the very beginning and then reappears periodically throughout the film in order to punctuate the action as a formal, rhythmic element in itself.

In his detailed study of 1920s rhythm debates, Michael Cowan outlines a distinction between two different types of rhythm inherited from turn-of-the-century work science, Karl Bücher's *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (1896), most notably. In works like *Vom Wesen des Rhythmus* (1923) by vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages, Bücher's distinction between pre-modern, communal work rhythms and the mechanical rhythms of modern industrial production becomes amplified as part of a pessimistic diagnosis of modern, technological culture. Klages, in particular, emphatically distinguishes the vital, physiological and cosmic rhythms of biological processes and planetary cycles (*Rhythmus*) from the rational, mechanical cadences of modern technology and clock-time (*Takt*).[400] While this distinction was treated with far more ambivalence in cultural

production of the 1920s, artists frequently looked to rhythm (especially in time-based, visual arts like dance and film) as a means of affecting the vital, physiological rhythms of the human body. For avant-garde filmmakers in particular, as Cowan explains, cinematic rhythms were seen as a way of accessing and influencing the emotions and sensations of the viewer directly without appealing to their conscious involvement in the plot and images of the filmic content. As a mechanical technology itself, Cowan argues, cinema could be engaged as an interface or mediator between vital rhythms of the body and the measured *Takt* of the machine.[401]

The distinction between flowing and mechanical rhythms fits nicely with the contrasting movements in *Vormittagsspuk*. But as Richter himself acknowledges in *Filmgegner von heute*, the direct rhythmical element is far more pronounced in purely abstract film: "stärker muß der Rhythmus sein in Filmen ohne eigentliche Handlung, am stärksten aber in Filmen ohne Gegenstände, an denen sich das Bewußtsein des Beschauers orientieren kann."[402] Richter goes on to cite the power of rhythm to improve the efficiency of human labor (and includes a large photograph of men performing manual labor), before concluding: "Der Rhythmus wirkt gleichsam als Naturprinzip

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[400] For a detailed discussion of these rhythm debates and their cultural historical connections, see Michael Cowan, *Technology's Pulse: Essays on Rhythm in German Modernism* (London: Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, 2011).

[401] See, in particular, Michael Cowan, "The Heart Machine: 'Rhythm' and Body in Weimar Film and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," *Modernism/modernity* 14.2 (2007): pp. 225–48. In addition to Richter, Cowan cites prominently the writings of French filmmaker Germaine Dulac for an articulation of the unconscious, embodied and emotional effects of cinematic rhythms. See, for example, Dulac, "Aesthetics, Obstacles, Integral *Cinégraphie*" [1926], in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 389–97. Here, Dulac describes: "a rhythm of arranged movements in which the shifting of a line, or of a volume in a changing cadence creates emotion without any crystallization of ideas" (p. 394).

[402] Richter, *Filmgegner von heute*, p. 93.

unwiderstehlich — ."[403] Turning the page after the dash, the reader of *Filmgegner von heute* is abruptly transitioned from an image of laboring humans to the purely abstract compositions of avant-garde filmstrips (see figure 4.2). Cowan focuses on such passages in Richter's writing as evidence of his knowledge of Bücher's writings and the related rhythm debates of the 1920s. The direct comparison between bodily work-rhythms and the abstract rhythms of avant-garde animation provides a sound basis for reading Richter's early *Rhythmus* films as an attempt at tapping into and directly affecting not only the viewers' sensations and emotions but also the physiological rhythms of their bodies. Citing Richter's important 1924 treatise on abstract film, "Die schlecht trainierte Seele," Cowan reads Richter's *Rhythmus* films as a means of bringing these primal aspects of human life under the rational control of the artist's constructivist will.[404]

Returning to Richter's *Vormittagsspuk*, however, the situation is complicated considerably by the film's photographic depiction of concrete objects and human actors. On close analysis, Richter's constructive use of photographic materials in *Vormittagsspuk* bears a frequent, formal resemblance to his early *Rhythmus* films. Human figures move in and out of the frame according to regular, repetitive, and symmetrical rhythms just like the rectangular shapes in *Rhythmus 21* (as if to perform the direct transformative effects of cinematic rhythms on the human body) (figure 4.11). As mentioned before, however,

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[403] Ibid.

[404] See Richter, "Die schlecht trainierte Seele," *G* 3 (1924): pp. 44–47. See also Cowan's reading of this text along with the passage from *Filmgegner von heute* quoted above (within the related context of 1920s advertising films) in his recent article, "Advertising, Rhythm, and the Filmic Avant-Garde in Weimar: Guido Seeber and Julius Pinschewer's *Kipho* Film," *October* 131 (Winter 2010): pp. 23–50, here pp. 33–35. For the broader, cultural-historical resonances of Richter's abstract films, see Forschungsnetzwerk BTWH (ed.), *Hans Richters* Rhythmus 21.

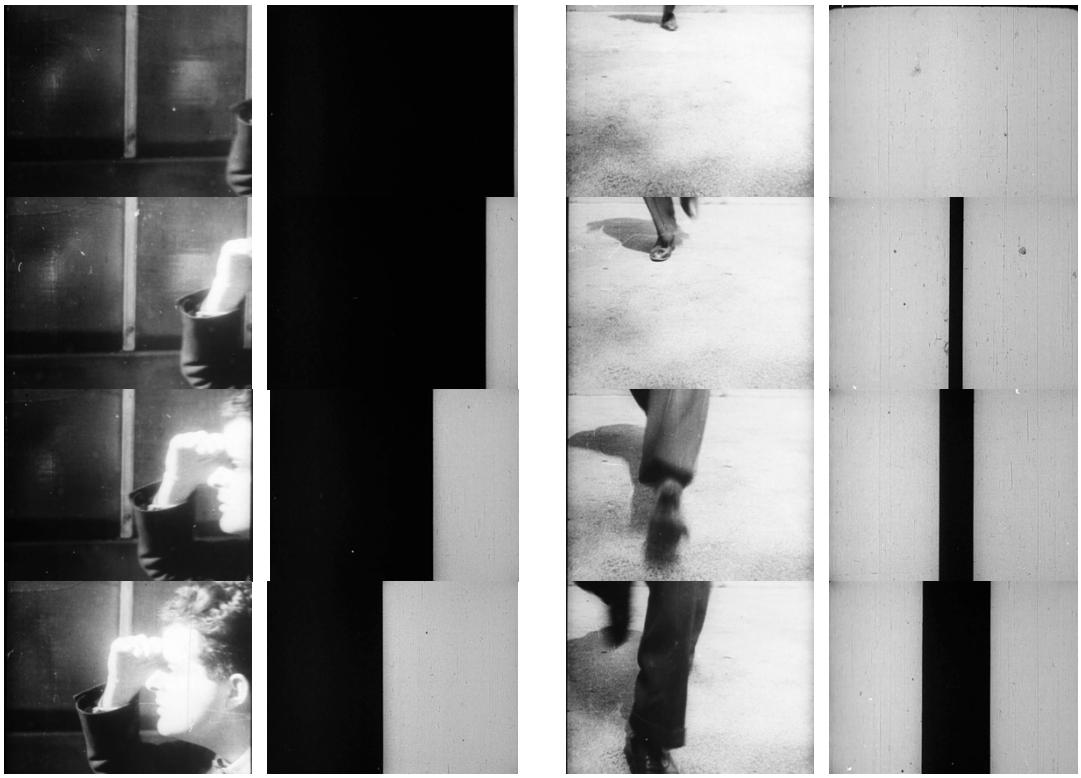

Figure 4.11. Hans Richter. *Vormittagsspuk*, 1928 and *Rhythmus 21*, 1923. Film stills.

these regular, mechanical rhythms of human actors are in constant interference with the flowing movements of the animated things, which invite the viewer's active and conscious participation in the image's content. (They are, as Richter suggests, "Gegenstände, an denen sich das Bewußtsein des Beschauers orientieren kann.") These two types of cinematic movement are mutually disruptive in the film. Any immersive participation in the movement of animated objects is quickly destroyed by the percussive, editing rhythms used in the depiction of the humans' mechanical movements. In turn, any attempt at directly influencing the viewer through these strong, abstract rhythms is also disrupted by the viewer's playful and imaginative involvement in the images' content: their participation in "playing" with things and imagining associations among the various visual elements in the film. Along with the deliberate exposure of the film's means of

production, the result of this interference is a powerful distancing effect on the viewer, who is enabled to experience the various cinematic effects without loosing sight of their artificial construction.[405]

After this closer analysis of the film, the difference between Richter's early abstract films and *Vormittagsspuk* appears not so much as a shift from issues of movement and rhythm to that of photographic imagery and narrative content. It is instead a decisive move to incorporate the earlier avant-garde emphasis on perceptual *training* within a broader, popular project of *empowering* the cinematic viewer. This shift is paralleled in Richter's own writing, which moves from provocative manifestos in early-1920s avant-garde periodicals (on the artist's willful, psychic and physiological training of the viewer through cinematic rhythms), to a transparent project of educating the viewer about cinematic techniques and their effects in popular late-1920s publications like *Filmgegner von heute*. Elsewhere, Richter directly states his desire to produce films for a broader audience without compromising the imaginative possibilities and estranging effects that were crucial to avant-garde cinema.[406] The general public should demand such films, Richter claims, once they have familiarized themselves with the full range of cinematic techniques and possibilities. Lacking such knowledge (which Richter attempts to impart in *Filmgegner von heute*), one might still come to it intuitively through regular

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[405] One might argue that this tension is already nascent in Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, which, in contrast to Ruttmann and Eggeling's abstract films, perpetually disrupts the viewer's absorption in regular rhythms through abrupt jump cuts and disruptions of the relationship between foreground and background. Cowan himself notes as much and cites the close formal analysis of the film by Standish Lawder and Malcolm Turvey. See Cowan, "The Heart Machine," pp. 245–46, note 44.

[406] See, for example, Richter's 1929 articles, "Der absolute Film braucht die Industrie" and "Leitsätze einer Vorhutarbeit," both reprinted in Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 43–45 and 46, respectively.

visits to the cinema. Since the commercial, narrative films are largely identical, Richter argues in "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung," the sheer repetition of the experience might lead one to uncover the "Rhythmus, Tempo, Takt und der plastische Wert der einzelnen Formen," which comprise the inner structure of the cinematic image.[407] At the conclusion of *Filmgegner von heute*, Richter offers an optimistic picture of the new film culture that could emerge in Germany: larger, appreciative audiences informed about the cinematic arts and a more widespread, independent production of experimental low-budget films, funded by private investors and disseminated according to the models of French avant-garde theaters and ciné-clubs.[408]

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Richter's vision obviously did not come to pass. For one, he grossly underestimated the eclipsing effect that the advent of sound film would have on the earlier visual strategies of the cinematic avant-garde. (As late as 1929, Richter still claimed that synchronized sound did not change the basic principles of film, but that sound might be used productively as yet another constructive element alongside the optical rhythms of cinema.[409]) More importantly, the late 1920s and 30s brought economic and political realities, which forced Richter to seek out commercial and industrial film work as well as more direct, political engagements, such as his work on the unfinished 1931–33

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[407] The same argument is repeated in "Neue Mittel der Film-Gestaltung." See Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 47–48 and, quoted here, p. 42.

[408] See Richter, *Filmgegner von heute*, pp. 118–21.

[409] See the section, "Ändert der Tonfilm die Situation?," in ibid., p. 117. For an example of Richter's rhythmic and non-naturalistic use of spoken words, music, and sound in cinema, see his sound film *Alles dreht sich, alles bewegt sich!* (1929) as well as relevant documentation in Goergen et al. (ed.), *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, pp. 100–5.

production of the semi-documentary film *Metall* on the brutal suppression of a 1930 metalworkers' strike in Hennigsdorf outside of Berlin.[410] The case of a changing aesthetics within Weimar cultural production is more complicated and deserves a short closing discussion in itself, especially in light of Devin Fore's recent rereading of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the return of realism during the interwar period.

Following his superlative study *Realism After Modernism*, Richter's shift from abstract animation to photographic figuration in the *Vormittagsspuk* film might be productively situated in relation to what Fore terms the "rehumanization" of German art in the 1920s.[411] With *Vormittagsspuk*, that is to say, Richter's initially abstract experiments with cinematic motion in the *Rhythmus* films become reinscribed in relation to the scale and movements of the human body. As in Fore's discussion of interwar realism, the return of human figuration is not simply on the level of subject matter or motif. Rather, the human body also fundamentally structures the work on the level of technique and form.[412] In Richter's 1928 film, that is, the formal, rhythmic composition of the work is largely structured according to the motion of human bodies and their playful interactions with various objects belonging to the sphere of human use. That the appearance and movement of these bodies and objects is not realistic is beside the point.

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[410] On this period of Richter's film work, see Heide Schönemann's contribution to *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, ed. Goergen et al., pp. 115–22; and, in the same volume, the filmography to Richter's 1930s work for the Swiss *Werkbund* and Philips Radio in the Netherlands, pp. 107–11 and 133. On the latter, see also *Hans Richters* Rhythmus 21, ed. Forschungsnetzwerk BTWH, pp. 172–82.

[411] See Devin Fore, *Realism After Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

[412] See ibid, pp. 1–15.

As in Fore's analysis, the realism is of a second order, related to artistic form. Richter's disregard for the photographic nature of film resituates cinema's realism from a straight reproduction of the external, natural motion of objects to an artificial production of articulated movements, which invite the viewer's embodied participation. As Tom Gunning notes, the realism of cinematic motion lies not in the *reproduction* of real movements but rather in the *repeatable production* of a realistic impression of movement (whether those movements are in themselves naturalistic or not).[413]

In the end, this larger analysis of Richter's engagement with cinematic animation and its effects presents a far richer and more nuanced picture of the cinematic avant-garde during the 1920s. The avant-garde's overt enthusiasm for cinematic motion cannot be reduced to notions of "visual music" as is often the case in readings of abstract animation. Nor can it be understood solely in terms of the moral and somatic shocks of Dadaist provocation. The cinematic production of the avant-garde indeed seeks to disrupt and problematize the normal, immersive and absorptive viewing habits of the film audience. At the same time, however, the self-reflective treatment of animation and motion in films by Richter and others is also aimed at a different type of cinematic reception: one in which the viewer is empowered to consciously experience the construction and effects of

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[413] Gunning's discussion of the "impression of reality" in cinematic motion draws on the early, phenomenological film-theory of Christian Metz. See Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index," pp. 40–48. Devin Fore's analysis of interwar realism does not extend to cinematic movement, as he is primarily interested in the re-appropriation of the techniques and genres of more traditional realism (linear perspective, the novel, naturalistic drama, autobiography, and portraiture, in particular), which reappear in new forms after the ruptures of aesthetic modernism, social modernity, and technological modernization. While the birth of cinema belongs to this very period of modernist rupture, I would argue that forms of cinematic motion undergo a parallel transformation (in miniature) to that described by Fore—from the early, photographic realism of movement in the "actuality films" of the Lumière brothers, through avant-garde experiments in abstract motion, and onto a rehumanized self-reflection on the realistic impression of cinematic movement by filmmakers like Richter and Dziga Vertov.

cinematic motion and actively participate and play with its visual elements. If cinematic technologies had fundamentally changed the nature of human perception, as Benjamin claims, the avant-garde not only predicted and instantiated such perceptual transformations through non-cinematic means. The very films of the avant-garde also sought ways of demonstrating and making the viewer conscious of cinema's transformative effects.

CONCLUSION

In postwar comments related to his 1928 film *Vormittagsspuk*, Hans Richter provided an additional explanation for his cinematic animation of things. "Even objects are God's children," he writes:

> My love for objects (in my films, in preference to people, or anyhow, people only as objects!) does not mean a disregard for man, not a neglect. Rather it is a confirmation that humans are also objects, objects of historical, political, celestial happenings or simply objects of their own stupidity. Let them come together. People and objects in a space of friendly and mutual respect. Maybe the teaching "Love your neighbor as yourself"—the neighbor you cannot stand—will then approach reality, will lead to a general tendency towards an attention to the life of ordinary things, to an unexpected respect for the co-beings of the human sphere. Because, if you would become aware of Everything around you, constantly and without prejudice, you might then even include your neighbor.[414]

Included under the heading "Objects are people," Richter's playful remarks assert a strangely ethical dimension to the inversion of relations between subjects and objects, humans and things. With regard to *Vormittagsspuk*, the film's representations of animated objects and the mechanical, thing-like movements of humans are thus interpreted as a transformative vision of broad respect for one's neighboring "co-beings." Such estranging inversions, Richter claims, not only acknowledge the damaging effects of objectification and reification on humans, but also lead to a greater, ethical regard for other humans and things alike—helping to undermine the prejudiced or instrumental treatment of both. Ironically, the respectful treatment of other people ("the neighbor you cannot stand," for example) depends on relegating humans to the newly elevated status of things.

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[414] *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, ed. Cleve Gray (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 145. The above comments originate in a 1969 text, titled "Questions to Myself," produced in collaborative preparation of Gray's 1971 volume of Richter's writings and visual art.

Richter's ironic, happy vision belies, of course, the uncanny threat inherent to such animistic experiences of things in modernity. His own ghostly animation of everyday objects in *Vormittagsspuk* indeed revives the same uncanny effects of early object-animation films from around 1910. In the stop-motion films of the early "cinema of attractions," there is little suggestion of a "friendly and mutual respect" among humans and things. Rather, the cinematic animation of domestic objects provides an unsettling, visual counterpart to the new, animistic anxieties arising in the unhomely environment of the modern city. In the writings of Rilke, Kafka, and others, the hostile presence of animated things (suggested by the unlocalizable sounds found in urban, domestic spaces) does coincide with an increased awareness and regard for one's physical surroundings and human neighbors. But this attention to the surrounding life of other humans and things is not the basis of friendly cohabitation, but rather the symptom of anxiety, isolation, and estrangement. Rilke's Malte, for his part, speaks of his neighbors as infectious, noisy creatures on par with the corrupted household things he imagines to live on the other side of his apartment walls.[415] And yet Rilke turns to animation, as well, as a poetic means of staging and performing a more edifying relationship with things in his *Neue Gedichte*. And while Kafka might speculate on the happy belief in a household spirit or deity (*Hausgott*), his representations of the animated Odradek and the bouncing

[415] See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], in *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, vol. 3: *Prosa und Dramen*, ed. August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), pp. 581–84; and on the neighbor as a noisy, parasitic creature, pp. 572–73.

celluloid balls in Blumfeld's apartment are anything but a comforting, domestic presence.[416]

In the collected literary and cinematic works analyzed in the preceding chapters, the representations of animated things are shot through with these conflicting tendencies. The animistic imaginations present in the works of Rilke, Kafka, and Richter all display a profound ambivalence, capable of rendering an autonomous life of objects as an uncanny distortion and threat, or as a potentially transformative presence leading to a closer and more conscious association among humans and things. The inherent estrangement of animation allows it to take on this central role within modernist representational strategies. In modernist cultural production, as I have argued, the animation of things serves both as a reflection on a supposed crisis in relations between humans and things, as well as an alternative means of reimagining these relations.

Beginning with a proclaimed crisis in relations between humans and things in early modernist texts around 1900, the dissertation has explored a diverse set of aesthetic strategies for both reflecting on and remediating relations with external objects. The representations of animated things in Rilke's poetry, Kafka's prose, and Richter's films develop out of common modernist insights into a perceived rupture in the very basic human association with the external world of things. While such representations can be traced back to the emergence of modernist aesthetics around 1900, they also take on a particular social-critical currency within the historical context of the interwar Weimar years. As I have shown, prominent 1920s discourses on reification, social estrangement

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[416] Cf. Franz Kafka, "Aphorismus 68" [1918], in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992), p. 128: "Was ist fröhlicher als der Glaube an einen Hausgott!"

and coldness, and critiques of scientific objectivity and technology—found in various forms in the leftist writings of Lukács, Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno, as well as the conservative philosophies of Heidegger and Klages, among others—had a considerable influence in shaping the reception of literary and cinematic representations of animated things in modernist and avant-garde cultural production of the early twentieth century.

Rilke's reputation as a writer of *Dinggedichte* and a nostalgic preserver of things against modern destructive forces emerges largely out of this interwar context (particularly around the time of his death in 1926), with a new appreciation for the intimate and mimetic connections to things represented in the poet's earlier, two-volume *Neue Gedichte* from 1907 and 1908. The strangely autonomous life of things in Kafka's representation of animated figures like Odradek would become a central object of reflection in Benjamin and Adorno's epistolary debates in the mid 1930s about the structures of commodity fetishism, reification, and the distorted status of things in modernity. In cinema, an early literary-informed interest in the actor-like status of animated objects in early trick films would develop into a major feature of interwar film theory and aesthetics. Beyond strictly aesthetic concerns, Béla Balázs, in his 1924 book *Der sichtbare Mensch*, would even contrast the "life" and "immediate experience of things" in cinema with the dominant "abstraction" and "reification" of relations under capitalism.[417] While the avant-garde animation of things would exhibit certain discursive

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[417] Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* [1924] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 104. Identifying the "Verdinglichung" and "entmaterialisierte Abstraktheit unserer Kultur" with the "Wesen des Kapitalismus," Balázs begins the last paragraph of his 1924 film-theoretical treatise with the following statement: "Diese geistige Atmosphäre der kapitalistischen Kultur widerspricht dem Wesen des Films, der, obwohl in ihr entstanden, einer Sehnsucht nach konkretem, unbegrifflichem, unmittelbarem Erleben der Dinge entspricht."

connections to Balázs's neo-Romantic notion of an inherent "physiognomy of things," as well as Klages's notion of primal "rhythms," the experimental films of Richter and others would seek rather to rediscover the modern, dynamic world of objects in relation to the productive capabilities of the cinematic medium. Radicalizing the object-animation techniques of the early "cinema of attractions," avant-garde films of the 1920s would directly challenge the dominant, narrative and realist-photographic modes of commercial filmmaking and reorient the viewer's attention to the construction and techniques of cinematic animation itself.

While the theoretical fascination with a "life of things" in the interwar years provides striking evidence of the diagnostic, heuristic, and therapeutic power of modernism's "animistic fictions," it also obscures an important feature of such representations. As argued throughout the dissertation, the representations of living things in the works of Rilke, Kafka, and Richter proceed with a conscious awareness of the artificiality of animation as a deliberate, aesthetic procedure. Here, the self-conscious animation of things occurs in different manners according to different, aesthetic media: in Richter and the avant-garde, the self-reflexive construction of animation and movement through visual, cinematic techniques; in Kafka, the complex narrative construction of interwoven relations among humans and things, with open-ended temporal and spatial horizons; and in Rilke, the momentary and epiphanic, personal experience of things as emphatically and artificially staged in the *Dinggedicht*. Without giving up the possibility of a more immediate and unestranged relationship with external objects, the modernist works of Rilke, Kafka, and Richter, explicitly acknowledge the role of the respective verbal or visual media in constituting relations with things. In this regard, early twentieth

century representations of animated things cannot be easily identified with currently fashionable theories that take "life," "agency," or "force" as inherent properties of things themselves. Internalizing the rupture between subjects and objects, humans and things, announced around 1900, modernist artists instead explored the complex effects of aesthetic media in reconstituting relations to external objects, when more immediate, human associations with things were deemed irretrievably lost to the past.

Placed alongside the avant-garde production aesthetics of Richter and the experimental prose of Kafka, even Rilke's decidedly more nostalgic consideration of things takes on more interesting contours than are usually acknowledged. In the 1946 lecture "Wozu Dichter?" commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Rilke's death, Martin Heidegger would cite a 1925 letter of the poet's, contrasting modern, counterfeit things (calling them "*Schein-Dinge*" and "*Lebens-Attrappen*") with the "living" and "lived" things of a longstanding, but quickly disappearing past (*die belebten, die erlebten, die uns mitwissenden Dinge*).[418] Aligning Rilke's comments with his own account of the modern demise of the "thingness of things" (*das Dinghafte der Dinge*), Heidegger attributes this loss to the scientific objectification and technological production of things, as well as their exchange and circulation in the world market.[419] Four years later, in his famous lecture, "Das Ding," Heidegger would attempt to resurrect the "essence of the thing" (*das Wesen des Dinges*) through the example of an earthenware jug in his Black

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[418] Quoted here, see the poet's Nov. 13, 1925 letter to Witold Hulewicz, the Polish translator of his *Duineser Elegien*, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. Rilke-Archiv in Weimar (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1950), p. 483. For Heidegger's quotation, see his lecture, "Wozu Dichter?" [1946], in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), pp. 269–320, here, p. 291.

[419] Heidegger, "Wozu Dichter?" in *Holzwege*, p. 290–92, quoted here, p. 292.

Forest hut.[420] Rilke's later poetry and letters, written from his fortified retreats at the Duino Castle near Trieste and the Château de Muzot in Switzerland, can be easily aligned with a similarly nostalgic consideration of things of the past.[421] In Rilke's writings before 1910, however, there appears a far more interesting and open-ended exploration of the effective power of things. Emerging out of his joint experiences of urban traumas in Paris and the visual arts of Rodin and others, Rilke develops a sense not of some lost essence of things, but rather their complex, mimetic relationship to humans. While Rilke attempts to construct and control more positive relations through the artifice of poetry in the *Neue Gedichte*, his broader contemporaneous writings also provide numerous accounts of the instability and destructive side of a mimetic "similarity" or "kinship" with things.

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In many ways, the "turn toward things" in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can be interpreted as a reaction to the dominant textual and subject/object models of social and cultural theory in preceding decades. While poststructuralist theories seemed to have buried the material world of things under a field of signs, signifiers, and texts, the postwar iterations of Marxism rearticulated the old subject/object paradigm in ways that made the external reality of the thing utterly inaccessible in an age of rampant commodification and disembodied images.

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[420] See Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding" [1950], in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7: *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), pp. 165–87, quoted here, p. 176.

[421] Like Heidegger's "Das Ding," Rilke's above-quoted 1925 letter, written from Muzot, imagines the ideal thing of the past as a vessel (*ein Gefäß*). See Rilke, *Briefe*, vol. 2, p. 483. The nostalgic focus on traditional artisanal objects is also a predominant feature in the ninth of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*, where, in sections he wrote in 1922, the poet references the artisanal production of rope and pottery as a lost art of making things, which must be preserved through their transformation into some sort of invisible, poetic interiority. See Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* [1923], in *Werke*, vol. 2: *Gedichte, 1910 bis 1926*, ed. Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn, pp. 228–29.

Appropriating and broadly extending Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), for example, described an unbridgeable separation between the qualitative reality of things as things and their status as commodities and images. Congealed into an all-encompassing *spectacle*, the total commodification of the world, according to Debord, replaced "lived experience" with the "self-movement of the spectacle" as the dominant reality of postwar capitalistic society.[422] Around the very same time, Jean Baudrillard would describe the wholesale transformation of traditional "living objects" (like tools, furniture, or a house) into mere "signs" through the processes of commodification and consumption; and he would later give up any notion of a non-reified, non-commodified state of things, dissolving reality into the hyperreal of simulation.[423] Addressing a similar phantasmagoric status of things as signs and commodities in his 1977 book *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben would deem this situation: "the World of Odradek."[424]

While the things of modernist literature have often suffered a comparable fate, becoming either signs or commodities in postwar interpretations, astute literary readers like Roland Barthes made efforts to acknowledge the challenge posed by aesthetic

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[422] See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), quoted here, p. 26.

[423] See, respectively, Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* [1968], trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 2005), quoted here, p. 218; and his essay, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 1–42. On Baudrillard's move away from his 1960s use of Marxist concepts like reification and alienation, see Andreas Huyssen, "In the Shadow of McLuhan: Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation" [1989], in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 175–90.

[424] See the second part of Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* [1977], trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 29–60.

representations. In a 1964 paper outlining a "Semantics of the Object," Barthes singled out modernist literature and film as presenting a very different understanding of things beyond reified signification: "The object very quickly assumes in our eyes the appearance or the existence of a thing which is non-human and which persists in existing, somewhat *against* us." And he goes on to describe literary accounts of "the stubbornness the object has in being external to man" and the "extraordinary proliferation of objects [that] invade man, who cannot protect himself," or, in film, "a more esthetic treatment of the object, presented as harboring a kind of essence to be reconstituted."[425] In the end, however, Barthes chalks this up to "the meaning of a non-meaning; [the object] is there to signify that it has no meaning; hence, even in such a perspective, we find ourselves in a more or less semantic climate."[426]

Between the simulations and spectacle of commodity culture and postwar, structural theories of signification, it is perhaps no wonder that art and literary scholars like Christoph Asendorf (in the 1980s) and Bill Brown (beginning in the late 1990s) would look to the cultural production of modernism for its direct challenge to the emerging abstraction, commodification, and semanticization of things. While there is an inherent nostalgia to championing this version of "modernism's resistance to modernity" (as Brown calls it), there have been clear benefits for cultural-historical understanding in reconstructing the complexity and richness of modernism's struggle against the supposed

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[425] See Roland Barthes, "Semantics of the Object" [1964], in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), pp. 179–90, quoted above, pp. 180–81. Sticking strictly to French literature and film, Barthes associates Sartre, Ionesco, and Bresson with the respective descriptions quoted above.

[426] Ibid., p. 181.

rupture in relations between subjects and objects, humans and things.[427] As I hope to have demonstrated in my own readings, this modernist response was in itself highly ambivalent and open-ended, and involved important self-reflections on the roles that aesthetic media like literature and film play in constituting relations between humans and things. While inspired by the work of Asendorf and Brown, I have also attempted to avoid the more nostalgic and recuperative moods of much recent scholarship on things. This dimension of recent work, I would argue, can be linked to a renewed currency and popularization of the philosophical understanding of objects and things in Martin Heidegger's work and deserves of a short critique of its own before closing the dissertation.

As discussed in the introduction, the recent theorization of objects and things—in anthropology, social theory, and cultural, media, and science studies—has drawn extensively on Heidegger's philosophical distinction between the "*Objekt*" or "*Gegenstand*" and the privileged "*Ding*." The popular appropriation of this distinction and its extrapolation within contemporary theory can be traced back to the work of Bruno Latour, in particular. Entirely bypassing the fraught, modern relationship between subjects and objects, Latour has sought broadly, since the early 1990s, to collapse the traditional distinctions between nature and culture, reality and representation, in order to rearticulate society as a "collective" of humans and nonhumans, involved in a "political

[427] See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): pp. 1–22, quoted here, p. 12. See also Brown, "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)," *Modernism/modernity* 6.2 (April 1999): pp. 1–28. And see Christoph Asendorf, *Batterien der Lebenskraft: Zur Geschichte der Dinge und ihrer Wahrnehmung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Giessen: Anabas-Verlag, 1984).

process by which the cosmos is collected in one livable whole."[428] As he freely admits, Heidegger's philosophical investigations into the being and essence of humans and things plays a central role in all of this, by designating a "central point where everything holds together, remote from subjects and objects alike."[429]

While Latour never tires of ridiculing Heidegger's technophobia and privileging of pre-modern objects and tools (justifiably so, I would add), he also reiterates his own version of Heideggerian nostalgia in relation to the contemporary world of networked technologies. For one, Heidegger's famous account of the breakdown of equipment in *Sein und Zeit* (the moment in which the functioning object becomes conspicuous in its thingliness), occupies a privileged position in Latour's account of political collectives of humans and nonhumans. For Latour, collectives come into being most prominently with the breakdown or catastrophic destruction of technology.[430] The latent nostalgia behind Latour's cynicism about technology's potential for breakdown and destruction also extends to his conception of the "nonmodern." Attacking the alleged rationality of the "modern constitution" in *We Have Never Been Modern*, he writes: "We too are afraid that the sky is falling. We too associate the tiny gesture of releasing an aerosol spray with the

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[428] Quoted here, Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), p. 304.

[429] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), p. 65.

[430] In Latour's account of collectives and parliamentary gatherings, it matters little whether the technological crisis is real or invented. In his opening essay for the 2005 exhibition *Making Things Public*, he cites as examples both the Feb. 2003 explosion of NASA's space shuttle Columbia over the southern United States, as well as the blatant lies about Iraq's weapons program presented by Colin Powell to the United Nations the very same month. See Latour, "From Realpolitik to *Ding*politik or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public*, ed. Latour and Michael Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 14–41.

taboos pertaining to the heavens."[431] In his overarching meta-critique of modernity's professed separation of subject and object, nature and culture, Latour thus presents a picture of continuity between the structures of "primitive" magic and those of the contemporary, scientific world. Latour's conception of the nonmodern is doubly nostalgic, I would argue: it hides a desired return to premodern magic and wholeness behind a cynical embrace of modern, technological breakdown.

Having located the allegedly disowned animism of the modern mind, Latour also draws explicitly on Heidegger's 1950 conception of the "*Ding*" as a "*Versammlung*" (of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals) and has gone about identifying all manner of "things" (like the hole in the ozone layer, for example) as irreducible, social gatherings of natural phenomena, technologies, human activities, beliefs, and representations. In its more popularized versions, Latour's anthropology of the nonmodern has come to resemble the return of a happy animism or vitalism in the late Anthropocene. With various, contemporary writers arguing for an "equal footing" of humans and nonhumans in social relations, these popularized Latourian visions are often presented in such an affirmative and unreflective manner that they might eagerly adopt Hans Richter's above statement about "people and objects in a space of friendly and mutual respect," without any of the requisite irony.[432] In the present age of diffuse violence and irrational beliefs, stark

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[431] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 7.

[432] Cf. the inclusion of Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* in the traveling art-exhibition *Animism*. For the exhibition's framing in explicitly Latourian terms, see the lead essay by head curator Anselm Franke, "Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries," in *Animism*, vol. 1, ed. Franke (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 11–51. For Latour's inclusion in a vitalistic theory of political ecology, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010). Perhaps Latour's

inequality, globally linked markets, nonstop digital media, and ecological collapse, a more skeptical reading of Latour helps to identify the real structure and purpose of his seemingly happy notions of the "collective" or "parliament of things." They are, in short, institutional models for the crisis management of a perpetually endangered world.

More recently, politically- and technologically-informed critics like Alexander Galloway have ventured direct attacks on the affirmative nature of much current philosophizing about objects and things. Drawing structural parallels between computer networks and "object-oriented" programming languages, on the one hand, and the ontological and relational accounts of things in recent theory, Galloway argues that Latour and associates merely hold up an uncritical mirror to the logic and infrastructure of contemporary cybercapitalism.[433] While these "realist" philosophies and social theories might succeed in descriptively tracing out the networked social interactions among humans and nonhumans, they deliberately avoid any critical investment in analyzing structures of inequality, power, control, and ideology.[434] The retrograde, affirmative politics of Latour and others is perhaps obvious to any reader informed by the broad twentieth-century tradition of critical theory. But given the surprising currency and

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most prolific popularizer is Graham Harman, whose numerous books and online writings draw on both Latour and Heidegger in order to forward a vision of "speculative realism" or "object-oriented" philosophy aimed at providing a phenomenological account of how objects interact. See, for example, his recent book, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

[433] See Alexander R. Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013): pp. 347–66.

[434] For his perhaps most polemical statement against critique, see Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): pp. 225–48. For a more thorough presentation of his social theory, with dismissive comments on critique as well, see Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), here, pp. 63–64.

proliferation of these affirmative, theoretical attitudes it is encouraging to find critics willing to address the problems head-on.

Far closer to the aesthetic concerns of the present dissertation are Galloway's related discussions about the need for new poetic and representational strategies to properly understand today's complex networks of information and data, as well as the diffusion of power and control throughout these networked technologies. Posing the important question of how to represent complex technological systems, Galloway points out that the intricate structures of distributed networks seem to elude meaningful forms of visualization.[435] While Latour makes concepts of "mediation" and "representation" central to his social theory, these terms are used rather in reference to mediating and representational objects considered as discrete agents within social networks. Galloway, by contrast, still considers representation according to an older model that maintains clear distinctions between subject and object, image and world, representation and reality. In these more traditional terms, a poetics or representational aesthetics still exists as a meaningful mediation between a complex, external reality and subjective experience and understanding. While Latour seeks only to descriptively trace out complex networks, Galloway is interested in the ways that they might be aesthetically represented in order to bring their functions and effects back into the realm of intuitive human understanding and meaning.

My small contribution to these contemporary debates is simply to suggest the continuing importance of what I term "animistic fictions," as a productive, aesthetic

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[435] See Alexander R. Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), pp. 78–100.

strategy for making human sense out of complex things. While Galloway stresses the current difficulties of *visually* representing complex informational and military networks, there are in fact important forerunners for such aesthetic representations in the postwar *literary* arts. One thinks here, in particular, of the encyclopedic novels of Thomas Pynchon, whose *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), for example, presents a sophisticated narrative account of the "new living arrangements" of technological media and weapons, synthetic materials, molecules, codes, and information, emerging out of the technological struggles of World War II.[436] Central to all of Pynchon's major novels is the fictional representation of technological objects as if they were possessed of their own agency or autonomous life. Rather than being considered merely fanciful figments of a literary imagination, Pynchon's animistic representations of technology have provided important insights into the human consequences of technological developments as well as in the development of postwar media theory—the work of Friedrich Kittler, most notably.[437]

Beyond Pynchon, one might also point to examples of "animistic fictions" in the writings of Don DeLillo. The first-person narrator of his 1997 novel *Underworld* explicitly compares the animistic thinking of children to a positive ability of consciously connecting oneself, "to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived,"

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[436] See Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), quoted here, p. 726.

[437] For an early example of this influence, see Friedrich Kittler, "Medien und Drogen in Pynchons Zweitem Weltkrieg," in *Narrativität in den Medien*, ed. Rolf Kloepfer and Karl-Dietmar Möller (Münster: MAkS Publikationen, 1986), pp. 231–52. Interestingly, Kittler's reading deliberately obscures the strongly anthropomorphic and narrative dimensions of Pynchon's representation of wartime technologies, while simultaneously benefiting from these very human strategies of making sense of historical information. Restoring Pynchon's complex and decidedly more humanist understanding of media and technology would be a productive strategy for challenging and revising the more questionable aspects of Kittler's anti-humanist and deterministic media theory.

providing examples like the material flows of household garbage, the "linked grids" of electronic media, and the shifting structures of corporations and world markets. The lost *omnipotence of thought* of the narrator's young son—his childhood belief "that he could look at a plane in flight and make it explode in midair by simply thinking it"—is rendered in DeLillo's novel as, "the paradoxical gift for being separate and alone and yet intimately connected, mind-wired to distant things."[438] Presenting a striking, structural similarity with much of my analysis of "animistic fictions" in modernist German-language literature, this highly ambivalent and open-ended account of simultaneous detachment and interconnection in relation to things is framed in DeLillo's novel as a productive strategy for imaginatively situating oneself within a complex and threatening world, in which animated networks and systems seem to operate beyond the access of human understanding and control.

Although there exist certain resemblances between these postwar literary examples and the function of animation and animism in German modernist fictions, it must also be said that such a reading of Pynchon or DeLillo would have to be situated in relation to a very different set of historical, economic, political, epistemic, and media-technological conditions. As these brief examples suggest, however, the possible legacy of modernism's "animistic fictions" lies less in current versions of post-humanist social theory like Latour's, but rather in the complex, fictional representations of postwar literature. In the cases of both Pynchon and DeLillo, the anxiety or paranoia brought on by the thought of systems, networks, and technologies possessed of a "life" external and autonomous to human control coincides with a more productive dimension to such

[438] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), quoted above, pp. 88–89.

animistic thinking: the ability to develop a more intuitive, human understanding and awareness of the diffuse power and effects of one's nonhuman environment. This is not to say that external objects are in themselves possessed of an animated "life" or "agency," but rather that the fictional rendering of such a nonhuman life can bring the usually unnoticed workings of things back into human perspective and consideration. While, in the early twentieth century, this function of fictional animism developed at the intersections of urban experience, cinema, and the fragmentary texts of modernist poetry and prose, it would have to be substantially rethought in relation to the cybernetic paradigms and massive, encyclopedic novels of the postwar period.

Aside from these more mental structures of animistic thinking, the dissertation's focus on animation in film and literary aesthetics poses another possible horizon for exploring animistic fictions into the postwar period. The close interrelationship between poetry and avant-garde film, particularly in the postwar United States, presents many possibilities for analyzing the different functions of verbal and visual media in the artificial production of animistic experience. Here, I would cite as a prime example the productive exchange between the poet Charles Olson and filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Olson's anthropologically informed poetics make animation a central feature in both the form and content of literary representation, focusing not only on the "kinetics of the thing" represented, but also on an aesthetic collapsing of distinctions between the human subject and material object through the physiological act of poetic breath (*anima*).[439] In

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[439] See Olson's important programmatic text from 1950, "Projective Verse," *Poetry New York* 3 (1950), reprinted in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1967), pp. 15–26, quoted here, p. 16. See, in particular, pp. 20–21: "Because breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in [...], because, now, a poem has, by speech,

his 1963 book *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage directly quotes Olson's statements on poetics as a perfect description of the "working processes" involved in his filmmaking: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."[440] This sense of an animated presence of perception in cinema would be explored both in Brakhage's handmade abstract films as well as in the embodied movements represented through his dynamic use of hand-held cameras. Reflecting back on the broader developments of postwar avant-garde film in the mid 1990s, Brakhage would privilege this "constant present-tense" of cinematic movement for its ability to externally reproduce the embodied movements or "dance" of the cameraperson in reaction to material objects, "which one would aesthetically separate oneself from and directly incorporate."[441] Beyond his own films, Brakhage cites the work of Marie Menken, in particular, as exemplifying this sense of cinematic aesthetics, and one might think here, as well, of other avant-garde filmmakers like Maya Deren, who made the interaction between embodied movement and material objects central to her cinematic representations. This, in Brakhage's rendering, was the meaning of William Carlos Williams's modernist poetic dictum, "No ideas but in things."[442]

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solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things; and, though insisting upon the absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing, yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies."

[440] See this quotation of Olson's "Projective Verse," in Stan Brakhage, "Margin Alien," in *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (Film Culture, 1963), reprinted in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, NY: Documentext/ McPherson, 2001), pp. 60–71, here, p. 67.

[441] See Stan Brakhage, "Inspirations" [1996], in *Essential Brakhage*, pp. 208–11, quoted here, pp. 210 and 209, respectively.

[442] Ibid., p. 209.

While the cinematic and literary production of postwar Germany and Austria poses far less continuity with the complex, aesthetic animation of things found in the modernist decades of the early twentieth century, the work of Richter, Rilke, and Kafka analyzed in this dissertation have found considerable resonances in the broader, international culture of the postwar period. An enthusiastic reception and influence of 1920s European avant-garde cinema in postwar London and the U.S. developed alongside Richter's emigration and tenure as instructor and later director of the Institute of Film Techniques at the City College of New York during the 1940s and 50s. Rilke, beyond his ongoing popular reputation as a comforting "poet of things," has found far more significant reverberations in postwar literary production. In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, to stick to my previous example, Rilke's privileging of the momentary experience and eternal preservation of things appears in caustic contrast to the cyclical, technological destruction and mass murder of WWII.[443] For Kafka's part, his animated Odradek continues to crop up in all manner of contexts—whether in visual or literary representations, popular culture or theoretical writings—and, in its uncanny afterlife, the strange animated figure shows little sign that it has lost any of its strange fascination or unsettling effects.

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[443] References to Rilke appear throughout Pynchon's novel. See here, in particular, the comparison between the Teutonic romanticism of Rilke's vision of a singular death ("*Ein* Mal / jedes, nur *ein* Mal") found in the ninth of his *Duineser Elegien* and the looped molecular structure of the chemical compound benzene related to both capitalistic cycles of technological exploitation of nature as well as IG Farben's chemical involvement in the repeated, systematic mass-murders of the Holocaust (*Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 413).

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